ARON BEAUREGARD'S

PLAYGROUND

CHILD OF DIVORCE

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ARON BEAUREGARD

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WARNING:
This book contains scenes and subject matter that are disgusting and disturbing; easily offended people are not the intended audience.

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For my wife, who gave me the inspiration for Playground.

And for my mother, who brought me there as a child.

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READER NOTE

This book is a prequel to the events that occurred in Aron Beauregard's *Playground*. While *Playground: Child of Divorce* and the original book can be read in any order, for the optimal reading experience it is suggested that you read *Playground* first.

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WARNING

IN CASE THE COVER DIDN'T GIVE IT AWAY . . . THIS BOOK CONTAINS SCENES OF GRAPHIC VIOLENCE INVOLVING CHILDREN, PLUS A BUNCH OF OTHER HEINOUS STUFF THAT I'M NOT GOING TO SPOIL. PLEASE DO YOUR RESEARCH BEFORE READING.

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CHILD OF DIVORCE

When Matthew Cookson's family split in half, it felt like his soul did too. Not only had his family split in half, but it mutated. The axis of his entire universe had suddenly warped, and the cluster of adults orbiting him had grown by one: another man.

Bill's so weird, Matthew thought. *This whole thing is weird.*

As he watched the tiny television in his room, he tried to distract himself from the overwhelming feeling that his entire world was falling apart. The TV was one of many new gifts from his mother. It was like she thought throwing money at him would somehow solve the problem of his dissolving family unit and make everything normal again.

Things were the polar opposite at his dad's apartment. And from the way his father talked, all that money she so willingly tossed around belonged to him anyway. Matthew didn't know what to believe. They both constantly tore each other down—in private to him, but they'd have said it to each other face-to-face too if given the chance. He'd seen it many times.

As Razor Ramon stroked his slick black mane, ensuring every hair was in place, Matthew tried to lose himself in the cocky promo. Razor talked about needing no one, taking whatever he wanted, and beating down people who had a problem with it.

The poster on his wall showed Razor dropping his finishing move, The Razor's Edge, on some jobber. At the bottom in big letters was THE BAD GUY.

Sometimes it's better to be the bad guy.

"Matthew!" his mother yelled.

“Yeah?”

“Come out here, please.”

He sighed and got out of bed. When he made his way into the kitchen, he found his mother, Trish, with one arm around the mutation.

Her new boyfriend—*Bill*—stared at him. Bill seemed almost intimidated. “Hey, kiddo. I know things have been a little rough.”

Matthew rolled his eyes, wondering how they would try to buy his love this time.

“Anyway,” Bill continued, “I know I gave you some advice a few times that might’ve been . . . unsolicited. I just want you to know that in no way am I trying to replace your dad.” He lifted a box from under the table, set it down, and pushed it toward Matthew. “So, I got you a little something to make amends.”

Matthew’s eyes widened when he saw the black and red packaging.

“No way . . .”

“Way,” Trish replied with a smile.

“A Yomega Fireball?!” he exclaimed. “These—these spin three times longer! I heard they used them in the World Yo-Yo Contest last year!”

“Bill’s been watching you practice with yours,” Trish said. “He’s seen how good you’ve been getting at your freestyle. But he noticed your Duncan was a little banged up and wanted to get you something extra special.”

Bill nodded encouragingly. “Yeah, check out the back.”

When Matthew flipped it over, he saw on the other side that his name had been etched into the plastic inlay. “Wow . . .” He turned it sideways and took in every inch of the sleek design. “This really is special.”

Bill winked at him and clicked his tongue. “I’m glad you think so, kiddo. Maybe one day you’ll use it in the championship. Make your mom proud.”

Matthew looked up from the awesome toy, but when his eyes fell on his mom rubbing up on Bill’s shoulder, the excitement slowly drained out of his eyes.

“Yeah,” Matthew said, slipping the yo-yo into his pocket. “Dad’s supposed to be coming to pick me up in a little. I should probably go and get ready.”

“Oh,” Bill said, turning to Trish. “I didn’t know Dave was coming today . . . ?”

Matthew turned to leave.

“He won’t be here for another hour or so,” his mother said. “Matthew!”

He stopped and turned around.

“What do you say?” Trish asked.

Matthew rolled his eyes again. “Thank you.”

He trudged back to his room, but his mother followed and closed the door behind her.

“Honey, Bill put a lot of thought into your gift. You shouldn’t just brush it off. Don’t you know being ungrateful’s a sin?”

Matthew turned and glared at her. “You know what else is a sin?”

“What?”

He looked at the framed photo of him, his father, and his mother atop his dresser. They were all huddled together in the backyard, happy as could be. Matthew turned back to his mother.

“Divorce.”

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BASEMENT DWELLERS

Matthew glared at his father, passed out on the sofa bed, and shuddered. He listened to the way his obnoxiously loud snoring mixed with the cries of a mouse caught in the snap trap in the corner of the room. Was there a lower point in his life up until now? He didn't think so.

The repetitive snores bothered him, but not as much as the shrill whining of the injured rodent. But what he hated most about the basement apartment was the cockroaches. It was hard for him to sleep there, his eyes constantly scanning the dark walls of his bedroom at night as he thought about them crawling in his ears while he slept.

Why did this have to happen? Matthew thought. *Why did we have to come to this place? Maybe it is my fault . . . maybe it's because of me that Mom and Dad got divorced.*

The way his parents immediately reassured him that wasn't the case after breaking the news strangely triggered the opposite effect. It made him kind of believe it *was* his fault.

Why would they even bring it up? It's not like I asked . . .

Matthew's dad had promised he'd take him to the playground that morning, but instead Matthew ended up playing video games in his room. Dave just sat around most of the day watching wrestling, then had a liquid lunch, before he eventually passed out.

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After smelling the stagnant air of the basement for several hours and beating *Mortal Kombat* and most of *Doom*, Matthew knew that if he was going to see the playground that day, he'd need to wake his dad up before the sun went down.

The reason he continued to hesitate was because of the way his father acted when he drank. He was either a little meaner and automatically argumentative, or just depressed and full of complaints. Matthew didn't like seeing either version of him. He just wanted the same dad he'd had since he could remember. Not the depressed, basement-dwelling alcoholic.

The rare times when Dave did act normal were tainted by Matthew's nasty attitude. But he couldn't help it. He felt like he was only able to convey his anger when his dad wasn't a mess. If he did so to the other versions of the man, it was pointless—his inebriation ensured the message had zero chance of being transmitted.

There were several ways that Matthew's resentment toward his father tended to manifest. One way Matthew felt he could get back at him was being short and cold in his responses.

But the best way was talking about Bill.

His father *hated* his mom's new boyfriend—that was one thing they actually had in common. But as much as Matthew despised Bill too, he couldn't help using him and the things he said to upset his father. Part of him hoped that if he acted like Bill was influencing him enough, his father would somehow step in. Beat up Bill, kick him out, and then take back his rightful place beside his mother, so that the three of them could live together again. So that things could go back to normal.

The poor mouse's wails finally died down, sparking another thought.

Maybe I should tell Mom about this place . . .

He'd debated the idea before, but worried about getting his father in trouble. If his mom knew how nasty the apartment was, he might not be able to see his father at all. But as of late, Matthew wondered if seeing his dad in such a way actually hurt him more than if he were to cut the drunk out of his life entirely.

I don't know anyone here. I lost all my friends and had to switch to this new school. I . . . I just wish life would go back to the way it was. Before I even knew what divorce was.

"Dad, wake up!" Matthew yelled, finally finding his courage. "Dad! You said that you'd take me to the playground today, remember?"

Dave’s snores subsided, and he woke with a pruned forehead. He held the top of his face with one hand.

“Huh?”

“The playground,” Matthew reiterated.

“That’s right, buddy,” Dave said, looking toward the window at the sliver of light seeping through.

Matthew was grateful that this version of his dad was closer to the normal one. It was one of the reasons he’d let him rest so long—he wanted him to sleep it off.

“It’s almost dark,” Matthew said sternly. “W-we’ve gotta leave now.”

Dave turned to him, scratching his stubble, hair a mess, and gave a solemn nod. “Okay. You’re right. Let’s go.”

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DOWN AND OUT

“I—I can’t do it,” Matthew whined.

He kicked his feet furiously but didn’t move forward or back in his seat on the swing set. The movements of frustration instead turned him side to side, only causing him further agitation.

“Buddy, relax,” Dave replied. “You can’t expect to figure everything out right away. Sometimes learning new things takes some practice.” His father gently nudged his back, trying to discreetly give him a bit of momentum.

“Dad, no!” Matthew yelled, whipping his golden blond locks aside as he turned to glare at his father. “I have to do it by myself!”

Part of Matthew’s frustration was with his lack of athleticism; the other part was with his father. If he wasn’t passed out on the couch so often, there might’ve been more time for him to have learned how to propel himself on the swings by now.

“Okay, keep trying, but if you start crying like last time, we’re outta here. Understood?”

Matthew nodded, letting his internal misery continue to stew inside. He knew it wasn’t *his* fault that he was so behind on stuff that other kids easily picked up.

He only thinks about beer . . . not me, Matthew thought.

He could feel his father watching him. Standing by as he continued to struggle. His silent judgment was painful.

“Why don’t you just let me help you a little?” Dave said. “Just to get you started—”

“No!” Matthew hissed. “Bill says I should try to figure out how to do stuff on my own.”

While he yearned for his dad’s guidance, it was starting to annoy him. Clearly his father didn’t really care. He was just going through the motions. Talking about Bill felt like a good way to get back at him.

“Oh, *Bill* says . . . ?”

“Mom says so too.”

From the corner of Matthew’s eye, he watched Dave grimace as if the bubbling feelings of disappointment and heartache were rumbling inside him. As Dave shook his head in disgust, it was clear to Matthew that his dad was still having trouble digesting his new reality.

That makes two of us, Matthew thought.

“Well, if you wanna be a dentist, like me, first you’ve got to learn how to,” Dave said. “You can’t just go inside someone’s mouth and start playing around. It takes a lot of instruction and help—”

“I don’t wanna be a dentist anymore,” Matthew said.

He knew those words would break his father’s heart. Dave had always taken a strange pride in his career. Ever since Matthew could remember, his father was always ready to push his knowledge onto him. And the sheer shock in his tone as he tried to come to grips with the statement told him that much.

“Wha . . . what do you mean?”

“A dentist is a nerd’s job,” Matthew said. “Bill says a real man doesn’t clean—that’s a woman’s job. A real man builds. You know, like with his hands. Like how Bill works for King’s Construction. Plus, I don’t wanna live in that basement with bugs and mice like you do.”

Some of the vernacular that Matthew used wasn’t his. He’d borrowed things that Bill had said while tearing Dave down behind his back. But the last point—about not wanting to live in an infested basement—was his and his alone.

Dave shook his head. “The basement stuff is—that’s just temporary. If your goddamn mother wasn’t raking me over the coals, I’d have us set up in a much nicer place. But right now, I just have to—”

“You always blame Mom, and she always blames you,” Matthew interrupted. “I didn’t ask for any of this! Why can’t you guys just get along?!”

“I wish I knew.” Dave put his hand on Matthew’s shoulder and exhaled. “But I still love you very much—and your mother does too. We’ll get through this. I promise we’ll . . . we’ll figure out a way. Okay?”

While Matthew appreciated his father’s rare gesture of kindness and consideration, it felt like too little too late. He hopped off the swing.

“I’m going on the merry-go-round . . .”

“Okay, bud,” Dave replied, taking a step after him. “You want me to get you moving at light speed?” His tone shifted to that of a superhero giving a speech to the public.

At least he’s still trying, Matthew thought.

Matthew kept running forward and answered him without looking back. “No, I’ve gotta figure out how to do this stuff on my own.”

As he skipped toward the merry-go-round on the far side of the playground, he felt the haunting sting of worthlessness. His internal battle continued.

He thought about the times when the three of them would sit on the couch happily together. The movie night where they watched *The Shaggy Dog* and had homemade French fries. The smiles on their faces and the grease stains on the paper bags they used to dry the oil off the fries still stuck in his mind.

I miss when we were like that . . .

It had all started with his father sleeping on the couch. Seeing him there alone had deeply bothered Matthew. All he wanted was for his parents to sleep in the same bed together again. He’d never seen them fight or yell at each other, but their distance created a constant, cutting pain.

It felt like he wasn’t a kid anymore—like the problems adults were supposed to deal with were now on his plate. It gave Matthew a grim outlook on the future.

Is living with someone really that hard? What the heck happened to Mom and Dad?

As Matthew mounted the merry-go-round, he looked around the playground and then up at the sky, begging for an answer to his question. Nothing. No response to be found from the gloomy clouds—nor God. Still, the overcast that afternoon seemed like the perfect weather for a kid in Matthew’s position. It looked as if a tornado was about to descend any moment and suck him away into oblivion.

When Matthew finally got a little momentum, he noticed a woman and her child appear at the playground entrance. The pair made their way over to the swings where Dave stood, observing Matthew.

“Are the swings taken?” the woman asked.

Matthew could just barely hear them in the distance.

“Uh—no. Matthew’s on the merry-go-round right now.”

As Matthew watched the young girl get herself started on the swing, he sucked his teeth.

She’s already swinging by herself and looks younger than me! What the heck?!

The woman started to push on the girl’s back, helping her swing even higher. The jealousy Matthew felt in his chest stung.

Lucky. She must take her here all the time.

As the merry-go-round spun, he could see just how excited and distracted his father looked when he spoke to the woman. This was supposed to be *their* time together, but it was being overshadowed. An instant fear came to mind.

Does he want a girlfriend?

Matthew was already having trouble learning how to accept Bill. He hated being around him and hated the different dynamic created in the house. While Matthew and his father had their issues, it was seeing his mother with another man that made him most uncomfortable.

As the merry-go-round slowed, he continued to think about Bill while studying his father’s interaction with the woman in the distance. Matthew let his hand rest over the pocket of his jeans, feeling the bulge underneath from his custom Yomega.

At least Bill’s good for something.

Still, he knew very little about who Bill actually was. The man scared him in the same way the unknown scared him. While Bill hadn’t done anything to make Matthew think he was a bad person, there was still that lurking uncertainty about a strange man living in their house and sleeping beside his mother every night.

The possibility of going through the same thing with a woman at his father’s apartment was horrifying to Matthew. But as the merry-go-round started to slow, it suddenly became clear that the imaginary scenario wasn’t important. As he felt a sack slip over his head and an oversized hand clap

against his mouth, Matthew realized there were now bigger problems he'd have to face first.

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SNATCHED

As Rock Stanley headed down the isolated stretch of backroad, he flipped on the headlights of the Buick Roadmaster. Adjusting his flat cap, he looked into the rearview mirror, grateful to see there was no one behind him.

Gotta stay clear of the cops, Rock thought as he glanced down at the speedometer again.

The low hum of oldies tunes filled the roomy interior. The vintage music was typically all he listened to—it was all he'd been allowed to back at the orphanage. As trying as those times had been, they were far less trying than his current circumstances. The familiar tunes brought him back to when things were a hell of a lot simpler. While the life he was forced into living wasn't going to change anytime soon, he found solace in the momentary escapism the radio offered.

The crying and kicking in the massive trunk of the car was getting under his skin. He reached for the knob and cranked up the volume. The stress would be over soon. Once he returned to The Borden Estate with the kid, he might get a moment of calm—a break from Geraldine's relentless ridicule.

That's wishful thinking . . .

He'd been going back and forth from the playground to The Borden Estate for the past several days. After returning empty-handed the first couple of nights, he'd received a verbal lashing that had oozed with more hate than usual.

Geraldine thought so little of Rock and his ability to get the job done that she'd gone as far as to consider the services of Adolpho Fuchs. Just as Rock roamed the streets in search of a lost child or an opportunity to

emerge from the shadows and snatch one from its family, Fuchs was cooking up his own plans.

Hopefully now Fuchs won't have to use them . . .

Rock thought back to the motivation Geraldine had given him. She'd called him into the bathroom while she was defecating. The nasty barrage of words she'd hit him with was almost as vile as the scent wafting up from the bowl. Geraldine had grunted and wailed while cursing him for his uselessness, tensing up her yellowed and crooked toes as she forced the first log past her wilting walls.

Rock had looked on in horror as sweat beaded down the sides of her haggard face. And then, while she toyed with her coarse mole hair, the final, fetid explosion commenced. It sounded like an Uzi unloading a magazine into a ditch filled with mud. And when Geraldine had finally recovered enough to stand up, the porcelain below looked like it had been painted with extra nutty peanut butter and a jelly that had never quite gelled.

The stress that she'd felt while awaiting the first child for her trials had caused Geraldine to be careless. The violent force she used to push the feces out of her body had triggered the golf-ball-size hemorrhoid leeching onto her rectal lining to rupture.

There was so much blood that it looked less like a bowel movement and more like the remnants of a miscarriage—a bodily failure that her infertile form would've killed to even have the capability to produce. Like a water balloon filled with habanero sauce, the red blood from the busted 'rhoid mixed with the tobacco-colored fecal matter, creating the foulest expulsion of bodily waste Rock had ever seen.

When Geraldine pointed at the hearty swirl of blood-drenched feces, Rock's eyes reluctantly returned to the pile. The excrement had started to absorb the crimson ooze so that it looked like worm-riddled pulled pork that had been dragged through expired gravy.

Rock quickly moved on from the sickening mess and forced his eyes to meet hers.

"You're shit!" she'd yelled, still holding up her dress—the hood of her crusted clam peeked out, shaking with each scream.

Rock wasn't surprised by her comment—it wasn't a revelation. It wasn't the first time she'd drawn such an inference. But she'd never done so in such an animated way. As the muddy stream bled down her liver-spotted legs, she continued her tirade.

“Do you know why?”

Rock recalled shaking his head. There was nothing he could’ve said to her that would’ve changed anything. It was always best to just allow her to continue.

“Shit just lies there—just like you! It doesn’t do a damn thing until you do something with it!” Spittle flew off her lips, some glazing her dentures. She was screaming so loud that she nearly lost her teeth. “I’m trying to do something with you, and like usual, you’re screwing it up!”

“I’m—I’m sorry,” Rock had said. “I promise, tomorrow’ll be better.”

“It had damn well better be!”

She’d set her foot on the lip of the toilet and twisted her pelvis, her old bones letting out an appalling snap. Showing Rock her crater-laden ass, she spread her cheeks wide so that he could see the massive cluster of hemorrhoids.

The enflamed anal vein was irritated enough for Rock to see the tender hole in the growth that her blood had discharged through. But there were several other hemorrhoids in the area that remained swollen and unruptured. It looked like a small sack of marbles splattered with steamy pizza sauce, with the occasional brown mushroom rearing its ugly head.

He shuddered, recalling the sight of the gory mess.

The fecal matter caked on her wound forced Rock to suppress the urge to vomit. At the time, he didn’t want to even begin to think about why she might be showing him the prolapse porridge.

Geraldine had craned her head back, her eyes wide like she’d seen the Devil.

“If you dare to come home empty-handed again, then you’ll be on cleanup duty,” she growled. “You’ll be my personal bidet. But you should feel right at home with the shit, shouldn’t you?”

She always did her best to make him feel like exactly that—like shit. And she was damn good at her job. He didn’t want to go along with the sick vision she had in store, but the thought of what might happen if he didn’t comply with her demands frightened him.

Some time ago, she’d shown him her darker side. The horrified grimace of Wanda, the former live-in maid, came to mind. He’d watched Geraldine literally beat the woman’s brains out of her head. Despite occurring years prior, the mashed, bloody brain tissue falling out of the maid’s destroyed head still stuck in his mind like it was yesterday.

Murder ain’t an easy thing to forget.

Geraldine hadn’t resorted to such extreme violence since that incident. And as time passed, Rock hoped the murder was an anomaly. She’d killed the maid over unwarranted jealousy—jealousy that could never happen again, since Geraldine stopped employing maids after Wanda’s death.

It was then that her focus really seemed to shift to Fuchs. Either she’d been keeping the idea close to the vest or had another sick plan in her head all along.

Rock shuddered, snapping out of the violent and disgusting flashbacks. While he was far from happy to be part of Geraldine’s nefarious deeds, selfishly, he also felt a certain amount of relief.

Maybe he’ll find a way through it. The faint moans of the boy tore at his heart. *It won’t be easy though . . .*

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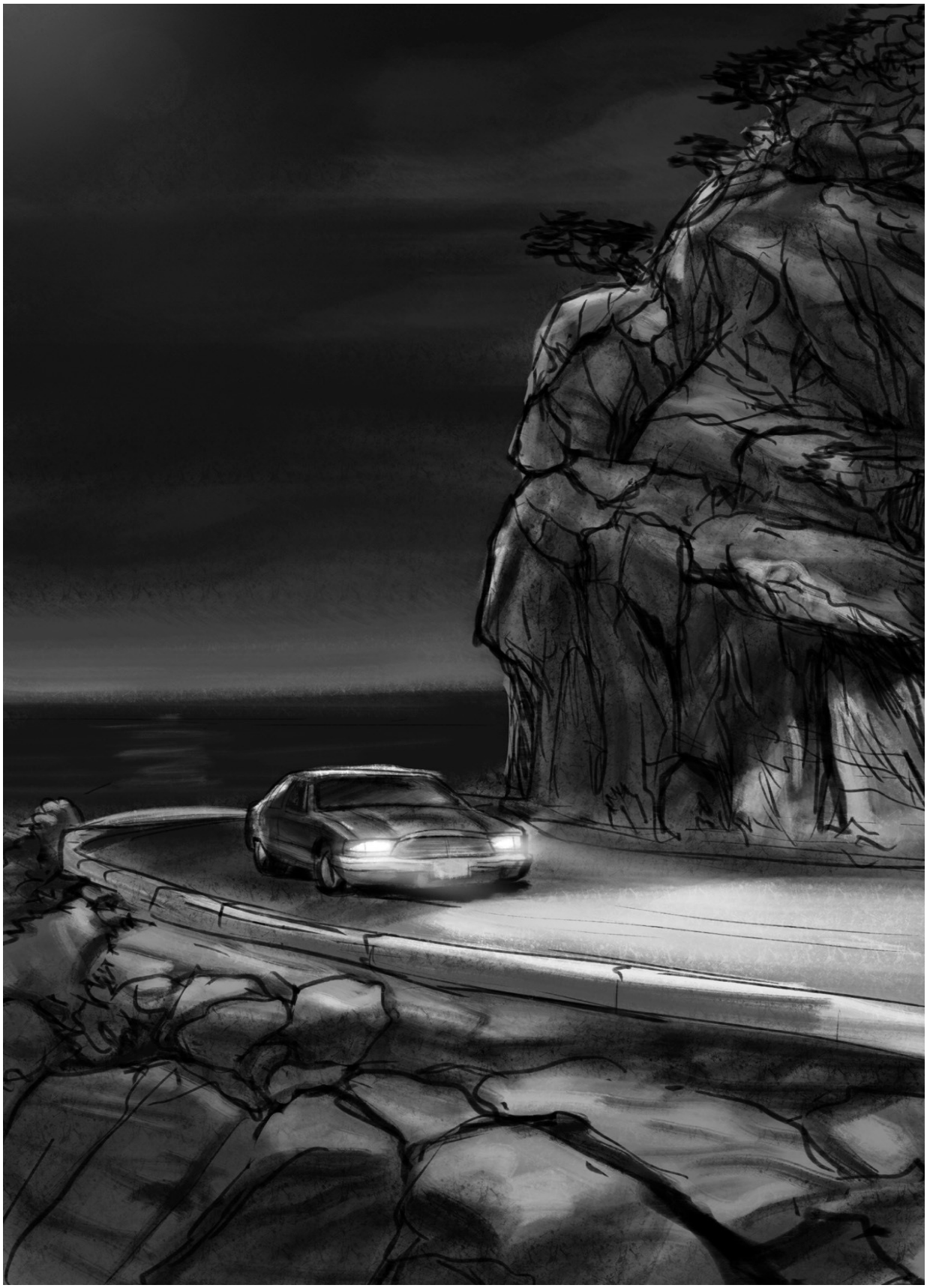

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As he stared down the dark stretch of road and ocean waters beyond it, the selfish side of his mind returned. He felt eternally grateful that the boy's father had been so distracted by the other woman. It created the perfect window of opportunity. After lying in wait, under cover of shadows, for what felt like forever, he'd been more than ready. When the moment arrived, he'd pounced.

Getting the bag over the boy's head and clamping his hand over his mouth went about as well as it could have. The bag was important—at least to Rock, anyway. If the kid was to have a chance at ever leaving the bowels of The Borden Estate, he could only do so if he hadn't seen their faces. At the very least, properly executing the kidnapping gave the boy hope. And in a way, it gave Rock a little hope too.

I didn't wanna take 'em . . . but I had to . . .

That didn't matter any longer. The boy was in the trunk, and the fear factor alone was enough to ensure he made it to The Borden Estate. While the idea made Rock uncomfortable, in the back of his mind he was a little excited that Geraldine might offer him some praise for a job well done.

Forget about her . . . Can I live with knowing that what happens to the boy is because of me?

Rock didn't like what he'd done, but he didn't have a choice. If it were up to him, he'd have no association with such horrible things. But it wasn't—it *never* was. So, he had to just be thankful for the little there was to be thankful for. As he listened to the boy's muffled cries, he shook his head.

I'm sorry, kid. I wish it didn't have to be this way.

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LACK OF MOMENTUM

When Matthew heard the gruff voice, he was confused. Part of him thought it was all a bad dream: the relentless pleading and crying in the trunk, the rope binding his wrists and legs, the bag on his head. The terror and stress of the kidnapping had caused him to pass out.

“Wake up,” the voice said gently.

“Wha—what’s going on?” Matthew begged.

“I’m gonna sit you down and untie you. Once I do, count to twenty and then take the bag off your head.”

“I . . . I want my dad.”

“I know, kid. But just take my advice. You’ll wanna do what I say. That’ll give you the best chance.”

“Best chance at what?”

After setting Matthew down on a rubbery seat and removing his arm restraints, the man paused for a moment. It was as if he was trying to muster the courage to respond.

“At survival.”

Panic punched Matthew in the chest like a furious Mike Tyson. He couldn’t believe that he’d been thrust into danger. Everything seemed so normal just a short time ago. He’d been riding a merry-go-round!

“I-I didn’t do anything—please!”

“Never said you did.”

“Then . . . why is this happening?” Matthew broke into uncontrollable sobs, hyperventilating inside the bag. “Wh-why are you doing this to me?”

“That’s a complicated question.”

The man seemed to speak with a sadness weighing him down. It was almost as if he felt bad for Matthew. But that only confused him more. He wanted to speak but felt trapped in his mind.

If he doesn't want me to get hurt, then why not stop it? What's so complicated?

He hated that fucking word. *Complicated.* It was the same word his parents used when he'd asked why they were getting a divorce.

Honey, it's complicated, his mom had explained while his father stood beside her, quiet as a dead mouse. *Some day—when you're older—you'll understand. I promise.*

"Just try not to get too upset," the man continued. "Get as much momentum as you can—and do it as quickly as possible. And don't be afraid of the jump . . . you can make it."

Matthew felt the man guide his hands up until they were clamped around cold chains on each side of him. When the ropes came off Matthew's legs, he heard footsteps echo, trailing away from him.

"Count to twenty, then take the bag off," the voice said, now farther away.

"Don't leave me here! Please!"

The sound of a door closing on the other side of the room was quickly overshadowed by a rumbling below his feet. It sounded like stone grinding and shifting. When Matthew realized something was happening around him, he started to count inside his mind.

. . . seventeen . . . eighteen . . . nineteen . . . twenty!

When he ripped the bag off his head, he was already starting to feel the warmth. To Matthew's horror, there was a massive gap of black space between where he sat and the platform.

The man's words repeated over in his head. *And don't be afraid of the jump.*

The terrifying drop-off into oblivion that he faced made his belly buckle with fear. A deadly pit surrounded him.

There was nowhere to go but forward.

That panic inside only intensified when he saw the flames ascending toward him from the pit below. As the dancing fire licked at his sneakers and the bottom of the seat, Matthew finally realized what he had to do.

No! Not the swings!

An additional surge of anxiety layered over his dread as Matthew grasped that he would need to quickly master the one thing in the playground he was never any good at. The very thing he'd gotten into an argument about with his father the last time he'd seen him. As Matthew flailed and turned side to side in his seat, he thought back to that moment. He would've given anything to have his dad nudge him forward now.

The flames suddenly exploded up from the firepit—it was like a stove burner had a gallon of gasoline dumped on it. The fire was more intense than any Matthew had ever felt. In seconds, his shoes started to melt and the rubber from the swing's seat started to fuse to his backside.

"Help me! Help me!" he shrieked.

As he continued to struggle, the only momentum he was able to generate was the only kind he'd mastered: side to side. The intensity of the fire and piercing pain was too much. He tried to launch himself forward into the pit of darkness, but one of his hands wouldn't budge from the chains.

The charred flesh and skin melded to the hot chain, bonding them together like extra-runny grilled cheese would two slices of bread. Matthew realized the flames were starting to die down, but it was too late. The agony was too much for his young mind to endure. Before he passed out and closed his eyes, Matthew had one final thought.

I wish Mom, Dad, and me had gotten to hang out one last time . . .

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MONTHS LATER

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TOXIC ENTANGLEMENT

“So, where were you last night?” Penny Lacroix asked her husband.

“You know where—I was at Steve’s, watching the game,” Andrew said.

Stephanie hugged her little sister, Kayla. She could sense the tension in the air, even from down the hall. When her mother started asking questions, the day always seemed to take a darker turn.

“Is Mom mad at Dad again?” Kayla asked.

Steph stood and grabbed the Walkman off her dresser. As she promptly returned to her sister, she noticed Kayla’s hands were trembling.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Steph said.

She didn’t like lying, but she felt it was her duty to protect Kayla. She was the oldest. It was up to her to monitor their tumultuous family situation. Even though Steph was new to being a teenager, she had an instinctual force propelling her—urging her to conceal the nasty aspects of their family from her younger sister.

Steph smiled, knowing—even if her grin was forced—such a thing might help comfort Kayla. But her sister didn’t smile back.

“Just listen to some music,” Steph said. “If anything happens, you’ll be the first to know.”

She slipped the headphones over her sister’s ears and pressed the play button on the Walkman. They didn’t have the money to choose what music they listened to—the only tapes they had were some of her mother’s old ones.

“Then how come your fucking car wasn’t outside?” Penny asked from down the hall, her tone growing even more agitated.

Steph's panic spiked, mirroring her mother's tempo. She'd heard this same argument too many times to count, and it never ended well.

"You left the girls alone?" Andrew asked, quickly changing the subject along with the channel of the television. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

The question her father asked was one that Steph often wondered about herself. She was old enough now to understand that kids around her age and Kayla's weren't usually left alone. The lives of her peers were filled with strict rules and supervision, while Steph and Kayla were practically given free rein.

Does he even care? Steph wondered, creeping down the hall to get a better look at her parents. *Or is he asking just so he doesn't have to answer Mom's question?*

"Forget about them!" Penny screamed. "Answer the fucking question!"

"I went out for beer!" Andrew yelled. "Okay?!"

Penny lifted a glass off the coffee table and threw it at the TV screen. As the glass cracked on the rerun of *Saved by the Bell* that was playing, Screech's face distorted.

"Bullshit!" Penny yelled, rushing into the kitchen and returning with a knife.

"Hey, just relax . . ." Andrew whispered.

Penny pointed the tip of the blade at his head. "If you're seeing that slut again, I swear, I'll cut your fucking dick off."

Steph glanced back into the room toward the pair of backpacks sitting on the floor. She always kept them packed in case they had to leave on short notice—in case things got too dangerous between Mom and Dad.

Exploding up from the sofa, Andrew twisted Penny's wrist. She immediately cried out and let go of the knife, sending it crashing to the floor. Andrew kicked the blade into the kitchen, and as the sound of steel scraping across the floor rang out, he put his hand around her neck.

"You keep pushing me," he growled, tightening his grip and slamming her up against the wall. "And one day, you're gonna push me right over the fucking edge."

Steph turned and signaled to Kayla, who she realized was just behind her, watching all along. Her younger sister quickly rushed back into the room and grabbed the packed bags, slinging one over her shoulders before approaching her sister with the other.

Steph pointed at the back door, causing Kayla to lift one side of the headphones off her ear.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” Steph whispered, taking her bag and slipping it on.

As Kayla nodded and disappeared out the back door, Steph turned her attention back toward her parents. They were so centered on themselves that it made her feel invisible. As her father’s hand tightened around her mother’s neck, she focused on the tears trickling down as Penny struggled to breathe. In a sick way, it almost seemed like her mother was happy he was doing it. Like she’d put up with him strangling her just for the attention.

Steph didn’t cry. She just readied herself.

She’d been through their agonizing altercations too many times to crumble now. Despite being tormented by the homicidal daydreams, she stayed strong. The thought that her parents might kill each other seemed like a very real possibility, especially given their history.

Still, even as the horrible, hurtful thoughts circulated through her head, she didn’t cry. Instead, she turned toward the back door.

I’ve gotta stay strong for Kayla, she thought.

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THE BOYS & GIRLS CLUB

Kayla cut through the park, following close behind her big sister. She was grateful to have Steph when things got scary at the house. It felt good to have some direction and distraction when their parents got violent.

Thank God for Steph, Kayla thought.

As the music continued to blare from the headphones, Kayla was already mature enough to grasp the irony. The song "Hungry Eyes," from the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack, was almost too perfect for the moment. Part of her wondered if it was the catchy keyboard and dreamy beat that drew her to the song, or if it was the lyrics that were symbolic to her struggle.

She was hungry for love. Maybe not the same kind expressed in the song, but love, nonetheless.

She imagined her mother had listened to the song for other reasons. Kayla was forced to grow up fast. At an age when most kids knew very little about attraction and chemistry, she was well aware there was something terribly wrong with her parents'.

It was hard to forget about what continued to happen at home. The profound weight and stress she felt every waking moment, just wondering if the day would come when Mom finally plunged that knife into Dad. It was hard to allow herself to be distracted, but the old tape somehow did the trick.

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While sometimes she still thought about the constant domestic madness as she listened, Kayla had developed a tic to shift her concentration. Each time the beat pulsed in her ears, she touched her thumb to her index, then middle, then ring finger.

She repeated the process over and over to the rhythm of the song, and she now knew the tempo like the back of her hand. As the song ended, she clicked the rewind button, ready to run "Hungry Eyes" back once again.

Just don't think about it . . .

When the sign for the Boys & Girls Club came into sight, Kayla breathed a sigh of relief. It was the one safe place that she and her sister could go. The membership was about the only thing their mom had ever gotten them—but it was incredibly valuable. Having a place that was close to the house where they could escape to after a Saturday afternoon fight was more important than any toy or game.

As the girls made their way toward the entrance, a tall, bald, black man in a blue swishy suit was exiting the building. Pushing through the doors, he made his way out. Each step he took was methodical and slightly awkward. His stagger was steady, but not enough to hold him back. The man took hold of the railing and started to work his way down the steps.

Kayla grinned at her sister, whose eyes had lit ablaze with excitement and recognition. As they both rushed toward the man, Kayla removed her headphones. Coach Calhoun was one of her favorite people on the planet.

"Coach Cal!" Steph yelled, her enthusiasm infectious.

"Hey!" he said, pausing before them. "What's up, girls? I didn't know you were popping in today. What's the occasion?"

Kayla looked at her big sister, unsure how to tackle the question.

"Oh . . . you know, just wanted to work on my free throws," Steph said in an almost shy manner. "Can never get too much practice."

Neither of the girls felt comfortable talking about the scary issues at home. Not with their teachers at school, not with their friends, not even with Coach Cal. They only talked about it with each other. Part of their reasoning was a fear of being outcasts, and at the same time, they didn't want to get their parents in trouble.

Coach Cal smiled, clearly impressed by Steph's work ethic. "You see? *This* is why you girls are going to be great. Anyone can have natural talent at sports, but it's the dedication to the details and practice that puts you over the top."

“Thanks, Coach,” Kayla said. “But if we become great, it’ll be because of you.”

Merely speaking with the man made the emotions inside of Kayla stir. Coach Cal had gone out of his way to encourage them—he’d given them something to focus on besides the horrors of their home life. He felt like a father to her. Sometimes she imagined what life might be like if he were.

“You’re too kind, kid,” Coach Cal said with a laugh, winking at Steph. “But *when* you girls get famous it won’t be because of me. It’ll be because you played to your strengths and didn’t neglect your weaknesses.”

“What’s ‘neglect’ mean?” Kayla asked.

“In this instance, it means don’t forget about what’s hard and focus on what’s easy. Be like your big sister. Practice the things you need to, but when the moment hits where everything’s on the line, do what you’re most comfortable with—play to your strengths. Right, Steph?”

“Right,” Steph said.

When Coach Cal noticed that Steph suddenly wasn’t smiling anymore, Kayla could tell that it bothered him—so much that he couldn’t help but question it. He put his hand on her shoulder and rubbed it gently.

“Hey, what’s the matter?”

“It’s just . . . even if we both get really, *really* awesome . . . it doesn’t matter,” Steph said.

Gazing at her big sister’s face, Kayla could see it as clear as day.

She’s got Hungry Eyes too.

While Kayla knew that her sister desired to garner the same love from their parents, Steph was also hungry for something else: she wanted to be successful, respected, and, maybe most important of all, stable. Her big sister had talked often about not wanting to be like their parents. When Kayla listened to her talk about such things, she could tell that her sister deeply feared the possibility.

Kayla would reassure her and tell her that they’d never be so mean and scary when they grew up. But she knew that Steph still worried about it. Whenever the fear of one day being like their parents resurfaced, it was the only time Kayla had to act like the big sister and comfort Steph.

Coach Cal furrowed his brow, clearly upset by the assertion. “Doesn’t matter? Now what would make you say a thing like that?”

“Because . . . they’ll never let a girl in the NBA.”

Coach Cal struggled to get down on one knee and look Steph in the eyes. “You know, my dad wasn’t the friendliest man or the smartest man, but from time to time he let a nugget of wisdom slip out. He once told me that if you want something in life, sometimes you just gotta do it yourself.”

Kayla watched Steph closely. When her sister wasn’t happy, neither was she. She hoped Coach Cal could bring her back around.

“When I first came to this city,” he continued, “there wasn’t a single black sports coach—not a single one. It was my goal to change that. And after I got T-boned by a drunk driver”—he slapped his bum leg like he woke up hating it every morning—“and had to learn how to walk again, I could’ve given up. I mean . . . would’ve had every right to. I could’ve said, ‘They won’t give a black man a chance, never mind a cripple one.’ Or, ‘How can I coach these kids without my legs?’ But I didn’t let that stop me—I wasn’t gonna let anyone or anything stop me. And look at me now. Maybe it’s the same for you girls. Maybe you girls are the ones who change things. Maybe you get so doggone good that you’re undeniable.”

Kayla noticed that Coach Cal’s eyes were glossy as he gazed into her sister’s, awaiting a response. Being that her father was white, and her mother was black, Coach Cal’s words resonated with her. Sometimes being mixed was difficult around other kids. They’d seen children from both communities accept and reject them.

“What do you say?” he asked.

Steph nodded as a tiny grin curled her mouth. “I hope you’re right.”

Coach Cal’s smile was full. “Hey, there’s only one way to find out. I just wish I would’ve known you girls were coming in. I would love to help you work on your shooting. But I was about to grab some food.”

“We’re gonna be here awhile,” Kayla said.

“All right,” he said. “Well, head inside and warm up. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Kayla saw the anger and worry in Steph’s face start to disappear. It was as if, when Coach Cal was around, those emotions didn’t exist—or if they did, they didn’t survive for long. There was just focus, love, and hope.

As Coach Cal staggered off toward the parking lot, the girls turned, excitedly making their way inside.

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UNDER THE BLEACHERS

Teddy Dent looked at Jazmine Rivera and smiled as they sat in the darkness. Under the bleachers was the only place to get a little privacy. And for the kind of activities they were usually up to, secrecy was an absolute necessity.

“Man, it’s just books,” Teddy huffed, annoyed as he looked into the bag.

After searching thoroughly, he dumped out the books and flipped through one. Teddy and Jazmine looked at the pictures of Adolph Hitler, the tanks, machine guns, Nazi insignia, and bombs exploding. But the text was in German, so neither of them could understand what it said.

“What even is that book?” Jazmine asked.

“This is Nazi stuff,” Teddy explained. “My grandfather has a bunch of stuff like this in his basement.”

She wrinkled her forehead. “What’s a Nazi?”

“Nothing that’s gonna make us any money.” Teddy shook his head, his disappointment still setting in.

Jazmine continued looking through the books but grew disinterested; they were all more of the same. “Back in the car . . . there was another bag —in the backseat. I noticed it while we were taking this one. You think we should go back and see if it’s still unlocked?”

“I don’t know . . .” Teddy nodded toward the space where they’d entered under the bleachers. “Is that weird old guy still around?”

She crawled to the end and peered around the corner. “I don’t see him right now.”

“If he’s gone, the car probably is then too.”

“Maybe not. What if he’s just in the bathroom or something?”

Teddy shrugged. “I guess we can check it out. Let’s just stay far away though, in case he notices his bag’s gone. Don’t want him thinking we took it.”

He liked stealing; so did Jazmine. Their love for taking what wasn’t theirs was what had brought them together. It wasn’t that either of them needed anything—their families were financially secure and relatively normal. They both just lusted over the thrill. They hadn’t been friends for long, but it didn’t feel that way. Teddy felt like he’d known Jazmine his entire life.

They’d originally met when he had caught her stealing some pogs out of his backpack while he was playing basketball. When he confronted her, instead of arguing, he suggested they join forces. He even offered to let her keep the collectible, circular pieces of cardboard she’d stolen from his bag, so long as she helped him get his hands on an ultra-rare *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* pog set.

She’d agreed and they’d been friends ever since.

The special set they were targeting—a prototype created by McDonald’s that hadn’t even released to the public yet—had been won by a boy who frequented the Boys & Girls Club. But they soon learned the theft would be no easy task. The boy who owned the pog set was savvy. When he accepted a challenge, he *never* played for keeps, and he didn’t show off the Rangers set often. This angered Teddy and Jazmine, who were still waiting for their opportunity to strike.

“There’s something else that I been wanting to take,” Jazmine said.

“What?”

“I was at Luke’s Music the other day and I snatched the new Too Short tape. That little Oreo girl that comes in here has a Walkman. We should just beat her ass and take it while they’re leaving one of these days.”

“That’s dope!” Teddy said. “But why don’t we just listen to it at your house?”

She blushed slightly before confessing, “My mom won’t let me play tapes with swears.”

Teddy felt his heart suddenly pump faster. Out the far end of the bleachers, he saw the boy. “Speaking of wanting to take something . . .”

Jazmine quickly turned and saw the shorter white kid. “He’s here—there he is!”

“We might have to jump *him* instead. I know you want the Walkman, but I was supposed to have those Power Rangers pogs a long time ago. It seems like the only way we’re gonna get a chance at them is if we make it ourselves.”

“You’re right. I did promise you that. But the Walkman’s next.” Jazmine looked down at the Nazi books. “What about the old guy’s car though?”

Teddy leaned forward and started to crawl toward the opening. “We can check if the car’s still there after we deal with this faggot.”

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COURT OF CRUELTY

Danny O'Brien finished the last of several consecutive backflips, landing square on his feet at one end of the gym. When he was flying through the air, making his body spin and twist in impossible ways, it was the only time he felt alive. After sticking the landing, he did a split. The flexibility required to set his legs flat on the floor was nothing for him. He was gradually growing into what he'd always aspired to be: a gymnastics master.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a couple of kids sitting on the bleachers snickering. Teddy and Jazmine were always hanging around, and usually they didn't have nice things to say about anyone. But he'd noticed that they'd taken a special interest in him lately.

"Queer," Teddy said through a fake cough.

"Only girls do splits!" Jazmine yelled.

Danny just tried to ignore them. When he spotted Steph and Kayla entering the other end of the gym and heading toward the basketball court, he promptly grabbed his backpack off the floor and migrated in that direction.

"What's up," Danny said. "Glad to see you guys."

"Hey, Danny," Steph said. "I was hoping you'd be here."

"You wanna play with us?" Kayla asked.

Steph dribbled her way to the free-throw line while Kayla stood near the hoop preparing to rebound.

"Whoa, whoa, I need to practice my shot first," Steph said, shooting the first free throw. "Maybe *after*, we can play a quick game."

“Hey, who says you get to practice first?!” Kayla said.

Steph snarled as she approached her sister. “Fine, we’ll shoot for it—rock, paper, scissors.”

As Steph started to shake her hand, Kayla took the scrunchie off her wrist and tied her hair up with it.

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!” Steph yelled.

Steph’s scissors cut through Kayla’s paper.

“Ugh, that’s not fair,” Kayla said. “You always win. C’mon, best out of five.”

“Keep dreaming,” Steph said, making her way back to the free-throw line.

As Danny watched the ball leave Steph’s fingers, he heard Teddy yell from across the gym.

“Brick!”

The shot narrowly missed, and the ball bounced off the rim into Kayla’s hands. When Steph turned and glared at Teddy and Jazmine, they were already en route.

“Crap,” Danny mumbled. “Here they come.”

“You gonna miss again, loser?” Jazmine asked.

Kayla passed her the ball, and Steph sized up the shot with a cold look on her face. “I never miss twice.”

The ball sailed through the air in a beautiful arc. The sound of a swishing net echoed throughout the gym.

“You’re not playing on *our* court,” Jazmine said. “We were just about to get a game, so unless you want trouble th—”

“Trouble’s my middle name,” Steph said, turning and taking a step closer to Jazmine. “I’ve seen things that’ve scared me, and you ain’t it.”

Danny’s heart was racing as he watched Teddy sizing him up. He knew Steph was tough, but tough wasn’t his bag. If the girls got into it, more than likely Teddy would be coming right after him. The idea of tussling with a boy as big as Teddy made his body start to tremble.

He’ll squash me like a bug, Danny thought.

He did his best to control his body and conceal his fear—the bluff was all he had.

Just act cool. Just—

“Leave ’em alone,” a booming, confident voice said.

Danny turned along with all the other kids. Standing at the edge of the court was Josh Slater, a tall and thick boy with holes in his jeans and a pair of white and blue Reebok Pumps. He squatted down and pumped up the mini orange basketballs inlaid in the tongue of each sneaker and then cracked his fat-padded knuckles.

“I’m all pumped up, and high enough to put you down,” Josh said, winking one of his bloodshot eyes. “Scram, or I’ll beat both your asses right here.” He glared at Jazmine. “I don’t give a shit if you’re a girl either.”

“All right, dude,” Teddy said. “Chill out.”

Jazmine stayed silent as the pair walked to the back of the gym and exited.

A huge weight lifted off Danny’s shoulders. The impending fear of doom was gone.

“Thanks, Josh,” Danny said.

Steph signaled to Kayla for the ball, and she passed it.

“I didn’t do it for you, loser,” Josh said, stepping closer to Steph and focusing on her. “I did it for her.”

Steph ignored him and took the shot, swishing it with ease. Danny had noticed previously that Josh seemed to have a thing for Steph. Of the kids that hung out at the gym regularly, they were both two of the older ones. He wondered what it was like to be fourteen. At just eleven, it seemed like it was still light years away.

“Did you hear me?” Josh asked.

“I heard you, but I don’t need your help, okay?” Steph said. “I can take care of myself.”

An awkwardness arose that was potent enough to keep Josh mute. Danny reached for his knapsack, moved aside his tube of pogs, and removed a Lunchables platter. He made himself a single mini ham sandwich between two crackers, leaving the rest in his bag for later.

When Kayla rebounded the ball and sent it back to Steph, her eyes were fixed on Josh’s sneakers. They weren’t something every kid got their hands on. They were special.

“Those Pumps are so cool,” Kayla said.

“Thanks,” Josh said.

“Me and my sister want them so bad,” Kayla continued.

Josh raised his eyebrows. “I mean, I could definitely get you guys some, but there’s a catch . . .”

Steph took her next shot and swished it, staying out of the conversation. While Danny devoured his Lunchable, Kayla rebounded and fired the ball back at her sister.

“What?” Kayla asked.

Josh hesitated a moment before working himself up to the task. “Your sister’s gotta go on a date with me.”

The next free throw misfired wildly, not even hitting the rim.

“Ew, no freakin’ way,” Steph said. “I’d rather die.”

As Josh bit his lip, a little white rat’s head popped out of his shirt pocket, scoping out the area around him.

“What is that?” Danny screeched.

Rodents made him squeamish, and the unexpected visitor’s long teeth and narrow face were features that he was not happy to see.

“It’s nothing to be scared of,” Josh said. “It’s just Polly. She’s my pet rat.”

“Pet rat?” Steph said. “Gross.”

Josh looked saddened by their reactions.

“I think it’s kinda cool,” Kayla said, looking at her big sister. “He’s sorta like the Rat King from *Ninja Turtles*. Don’t ya think?”

“I don’t care,” Steph said. “I’m not going near him or that nasty thing.”

“Just give it up, kid,” Josh said to Kayla. “Your sister thinks she’s all that and a bag of potato chips.”

Kayla turned. “Wait, you have chips?”

“No, that—that’s not what he means.” Steph scrunched her face.

“Um, well . . . don’t you want the sneakers though?” Kayla pleaded.

“Go get the ball.” Steph pointed behind Kayla. “Of course I want them, but I would never wear stolen shoes.”

“They’re not stolen,” Josh said.

“Everyone knows you’re too poor to buy them,” Steph said. “That’s why you’re wearing those dirty jeans with clean sneakers.”

Josh’s face went red as a look of shame was cast upon him like a dark shadow.

Danny was a bit surprised by how harsh Steph was being. After all, Josh had just finished saving their butts. Her comment about him being poor made Danny uncomfortable. Josh had no control over how much money his family had, and Danny knew what it was like to have something thrown in his face that he couldn’t control.

“I might be poor . . . but I’m not a thief,” Josh said.

“Then how’d you get them?” Steph asked, getting annoyed. “Still selling pot?”

His silence was the answer.

“You see?” Steph continued, turning to Kayla as she tossed her the ball again. “No way. I don’t want you frying some kid’s brains just so me and my sister can have some stupid sneakers.”

“What’s your problem?” Josh asked. “It’s . . . it’s like you always have something against me.”

As Steph paused her shot and turned to Josh, Danny felt a bit nervous. He’d seen enough arguing in the gym already for one day and hoped they could find enough common ground to at least coexist.

“My problem is that problems always follow you,” Steph said. “And me and my sister have enough of our own to deal with without you adding to them.”

A glare of disappointment and hurt looked like it was swallowing Josh whole. It was hard for Danny to stomach.

“Fine,” Josh said. “I’ll go.”

Danny watched as he made his way out of the gym.

“Don’t you think you were a little hard on him?” Danny asked sheepishly.

“That’s all someone like Josh understands,” Steph said. “He’s dumb as a dog.”

She took another shot and nailed it.

“No,” Steph continued, “I take that back. Even a dog will eventually figure things out. But not Josh.”

“He did kind of save our butts from Teddy and Jazmine though,” Danny said.

“No, he saved *your* butt.”

Danny wasn’t about to argue with her anymore. It was a lost cause anyway.

“Now that we’ve got the court to ourselves, what do you say we play HORSE?” Kayla asked.

Steph looked at Danny. “Are you in?”

He grinned. “Let’s do it.”

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OUT OF PLACE

Adolpho Fuchs stood in the hallway outside the gymnasium. There was an excitement stirring inside him. Everything seemed so much more real. He still felt terrible about how things had turned out with Matthew—not so much because of what happened to the boy, but for the viability of his creation.

He thought back to the firepit under the swings malfunctioning and melting the boy in horrific fashion. Fuchs knew the grand Playground taking shape in the bowels of The Borden Estate was far from ready, and this understanding put additional pressure on him.

I shall not squander my opportunity zhis time, Fuchs thought, looking at the group of children playing on the basketball court. *Zhe prototype must be perfect. I must show her I am capable.*

When the bigger boy wearing a pair of Pumps walked by Fuchs, his eyes darted down and he took a moment to focus on the sneakers. His gaze drifted back up and he carefully watched the smaller boy and two girls play basketball in the distance. The backpack on the ground remained partially open—the half-eaten Lunchables packaging exposed.

"Zhey are perfect," Fuchs whispered to himself, licking his wrinkled lips.

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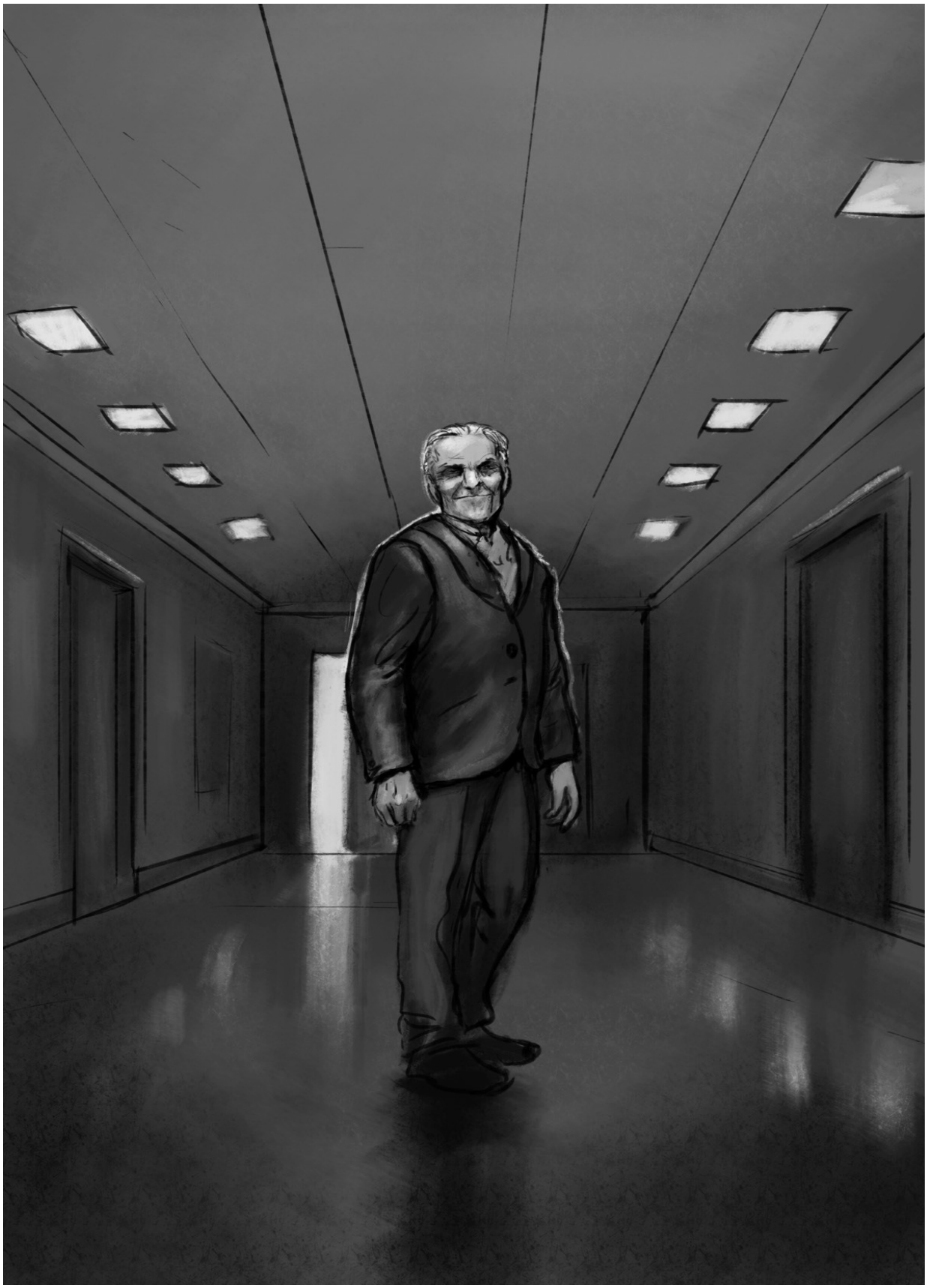

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“Who are you?” a voice asked from behind him.

When he turned, Fuchs was met by the puzzled glare of a man in a blue swishy suit. As the man stepped closer, Fuchs noticed he walked with a limp. Fuchs’ eyes fell to his nametag: *Coach Cal*.

“I am a representative from zhe Helping Hearts charity group,” Fuchs quickly responded. “I am just here to look at zhe facilities—to consider any opportunities for upgrades next quarter. Zhese children . . .”—he glared back at the trio of happy kids playing basketball—“zhey deserve only zhe very best.”

Coach Cal continued to glare at Fuchs. “Seems like you’re more interested in those children than the building.”

Scoffing at the accusation, Fuchs shook his head. “If you don’t believe me, zhen, please, I implore you to check with Lisa at zhe front desk. I imagine you’ll feel rather foolish when you review zhe amount of zhe check I provided her mere minutes ago.”

“Maybe I will,” Coach Cal said, limping past him, clearly still unconvinced.

Zhen maybe zhat will be zhe last thing you ever check, he thought.

As he watched the coach approach the two girls and start up a conversation, he could see how much their faces lit up. Their smiles made Fuchs smile. Watching their dynamic in person gave him a great sense of excitement.

How sweet . . . zhey are close. It is probably best I leave now.

When Fuchs exited the building and made his way to his car, he noticed the boy with the Pump sneakers in the alley, muttering something. He was standing far enough away that his old ears could barely pick up the words.

“I don’t have any more on me right now, and I can’t meet tonight. It would have to be tomorrow.”

The timid Hispanic boy in the alley with him slowly nodded. He seemed nervous and eager to agree. “That’s cool with me.”

The boy with the Pumps nodded back. “Okay, fine. Call me tomorrow then.”

As the pair separated, Fuchs got into his car and started it up. He looked at the passenger seat and noticed something was missing.

“My books!” he cried.

The books were some of his favorites. He’d found them in various antique stores throughout the area. Several of them even made mention of

him back when he was working for the Germans. Reading them had made him feel like somewhat of a celebrity.

Scoundrels!

While he was upset at himself for leaving the car unlocked, his attention quickly returned to the child. Slowly, Fuchs rolled around the corner, keeping an eye on the boy with the Pump sneakers from a distance. After tailing him for several blocks into a nastier part of the neighborhood, he watched the boy go into a rundown house.

Fuchs grinned as he stared at the numbers hanging on the siding of the porous property.

He won't be missed.

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WITHOUT GUIDANCE

When Josh entered his room, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He focused on the dirty, hole-riddled jeans, shaking his head as his eyes continued up past his husky torso before resting on his overgrown hair.

Stupid . . . a pair of sneakers isn't gonna make her like me, he thought. *How could any girl like* me*?*

Disgusted with his reflection, Josh huffed and punched the wall. He heard a squeal coming from his pocket, followed by Polly poking her head out.

"Sorry, Polly," Josh whispered, removing the rodent from his pocket and placing her inside a terrarium on his dresser.

While he wasn't happy with how his attempt to court Steph had gone, he was grateful that he still had one friend. Polly would never judge him for how much money he had or where he lived. She was loyal to him and always happy to see him. Each time he got in bed and let the rat crawl around on his chest, he felt at peace. He went everywhere with Polly, whether it was to school or the corner store. She kept him even-keeled.

After forcing himself to simmer down, Josh pulled a lone bag of weed out of the dirty jeans along with some money. He set it on his nightstand and reached in his pocket once more.

Just enough left for me. I'll have to pick up more before I meet up with—

"Joshua?" a jittery voice called. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me, Grandma," Josh said. "I'll be there in a second."

"Okay."

Removing his pocketknife, Josh opened it and looked at the rusty blade. He'd gotten the knife to protect himself while selling, but sometimes, when he got really mad, he thought about doing bad things with it. Bad things to himself—and even sometimes to other people.

Don't think like that . . . Bad days come and go.

He closed the knife and set it down, then walked down the hallway to his grandmother's room.

"Is everything okay?" Josh asked.

"Okay's a bit of a stretch." The old woman tried to adjust in her bed and get more comfortable while keeping her eyes glued to the episode of *Wheel of Fortune* on the TV. "I'm a little sore, and a little hungry I suppose."

"Well, I made some money today, so we should have a little extra food this week," Josh said. "I think we still have a can of hash. If you want, I can make us some hash and eggs for dinner."

"That sounds lovely, dear."

"Okay." He nodded. "I'll get on it."

As Josh turned to make his way to the kitchen, he stopped in the doorway.

"Hey, Grandma . . . can you show me how to use the washing machine?"

"Of course, dear. But can it wait another couple of days? It's just . . . well, those basement stairs are a real challenge for me right now. I'm sorry—I know I haven't been able to do much since my hip's started bothering me again. The older you get, the longer it takes to heal."

"I understand. I don't want you to be in pain."

As he made his way into the kitchen, his grandmother called out once again.

"Joshua, I forgot to tell you. A letter came for you today. It's on the table."

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Josh furrowed his brow, pausing as he entered the kitchen. “From who?”

She hesitated a moment before responding. “It’s from your father.”

I haven’t heard from him in almost two years, Josh thought. *Why now?*

But before Josh even had a chance to consider how he felt about the revelation, the phone rang.

“I got it,” Josh yelled, turning to the wall and lifting it off the hook. “Yeah,” he said.

“Hello . . . um, is Josh there?” a timid voice asked.

“Who’s this?”

“It’s Marco . . . we talked outside the Boys & Girls—”

“I know who you are, but I don’t get why you’re calling. I already told you—I can’t meet until tomorrow.”

“That’s not why I’m calling . . .”

Annoyed with the conversation, Josh moseyed over to the table and looked down at the stack of mail. The letter on top of the pile was addressed to him, and the return address read: *Rhode Island Department of Corrections*.

“Well, spit it out,” Josh said. “I got stuff to do.”

“Do you have anything else?”

“What do you mean?”

Josh took hold of the letter, feeling the paper. Knowing his father had touched that very same envelope made a melancholic sensation stir inside him. He couldn’t recall the last time they’d hugged or had even been close enough to. In a strange way it somehow comforted him.

In another way it enraged him.

Marco made a slurping noise before finally forcing himself to speak. “Like coke . . .”

The word triggered Josh’s grip on the letter to tighten. He bit his lip, beside himself with anger. For a long time, he’d found comfort by taking that anger out on others—belittling strangers, picking fights and beating his challengers senseless, and putting up a forcefield around him that kept everyone in check. He was now glaring at the letter.

Maybe if he was here, I’d have clean clothes. Maybe I’d know how to talk to girls. Maybe I wouldn’t have to sell dru—

“Hello?” Marco said, once again slurping after speaking.

“What the hell is that slurping noise?” Josh asked.

“Sorry, it’s my retainer.”

Josh shook his head. *This kid’s even more hopeless than me.*

“Listen . . . do yourself a favor, man.” Josh ripped the sealed letter in half and tossed it into the trash can. “Don’t get involved with that stuff. Whatever you’re going through . . . just trust me. It’s not worth it.”

The other side of the line stayed quiet.

“I gotta go,” Josh said, stepping back toward the wall mount. “If you still want the other stuff, meet me tomorrow at Pierce Park—on the playground—at nine.”

“Nine? But it’s closed then . . .”

“Exactly, dipshit. We don’t want anyone around watching us.”

“Um, okay—”

Josh hung up the phone right when he got confirmation. But as he stood over the trash can, staring at the letter, he couldn’t help but wonder if he’d made a mistake.

I didn’t need you before, and I don’t need you now.

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READY TO BURST

The crusty scab of Geraldine's ruptured hemorrhoid was moistening with each lick from Rock's massive tongue. As he lay on the bed, suffocated by her vile backside, he prayed she'd finish with him soon. And while that didn't seem very likely, he was still trying to think positive.

As Rock examined the severity of the infected veins rooted in her bulging undercarriage, he shuddered. He imagined that the slimy muscle in his mouth was the only thing capable of satisfying the deep, inflamed itch between her unwashed crevice. It was painful to look at, never mind touch —never mind *lick*. But it was clear there was some kind of faulty wiring in Geradine's head where pain and pleasure intersected.

"If you'd just been a good boy and done as you were told, you could've avoided cleanup duty," Geraldine said. "But I should've known better than to believe you could meet even the most basic expectations." She pushed her lower body down on his face harder. "You're worthless."

Geraldine rubbed her sagging breast with one hand and her pruned clit —it looked like a giant, chewed raisin—with the other. She then dragged the moist, ruptured wound up to his nose and brought the firm cluster of fecal-caked 'rhoids into his quivering mouth.

Why me? Rock wondered. *Out of all the people in this goddamn world . . .*

Rock allowed the throbbing hemorrhoids to enter his mouth, suckling upon them, tasting the bits of bitter feces, faint traces of blood, and mucus from the tiny holes in the skin lining. Holding his vomit down, he soldiered on.

After all, he'd willingly consented to the vile punishment. Each of the last several evenings when Rock had left The Borden Estate in search of children, he'd already committed to not bring any back. After what had happened to the boy on the swing, he felt like a monster. Matthew's melted and malformed flesh was a hideous sight, one that Rock wished he could've erased from his memory. But even if he could've somehow purged those ghastly moments, he could never change the fact that *he* was the one who'd brought the boy inside the walls of Geraldine's castle.

It happened because of you . . .

For this, he very much deserved to be punished. And as he felt the warm bundle of bumpy flesh against his lips and tongue, he submitted to it.

"My word," Geraldine wailed. "Harder! Use your teeth!"

Feeling the soggy scab of the last rupture point tearing away as she ground it against his lips and nose, Rock knew he was in for something *extra* awful this time.

"Bite it! Make me burst!"

As Rock maneuvered one of the 'rhoids into his mouth and nestled his teeth around it, he prepared himself. The strange things that Geraldine took comfort in never failed to astonish him. It boggled his mind that anyone could derive pleasure from such a repulsive act.

Just do it—get it over with.

"Quickly . . . I'm almost there!" she squealed, now flicking her wrinkled bean furiously.

Rock bit down gently, feeling the swollen vein tighten to its limits. As the small tear in Geraldine's skin lengthened, a lumpy combination of warm mucus and clotty blood rushed out like the floodgates had been opened.

The anal sludge covered Rock's tongue, causing him to gag and choke. A sickening mixture of revolting flavors wreaked havoc on his palate. The bitter, salty, and strangely metallic taste overwhelmed his taste buds. As the boogery 'rhoid-sludge oozed down the sides of his face, Geraldine rode him like a bucking bronco, wailing with a delight the likes of which he'd never witnessed.

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THE PROTOTYPE

Geraldine watched as Rock finished cleaning the blood and pus off his face. While her disappointment in his lack of results remained in the back of her head, she also gave him his proverbial flowers. But she kept the praise internal—she didn't want him thinking he was out of the shit house.

He's still good for something, Geraldine thought, adjusting and cracking her pelvis. *In one way or another.*

As she gazed down at an old, framed photo of her and her mother—Mildred Borden—she sighed. They were holding each other in a loving embrace. Geraldine couldn't remember the last time she'd smiled like that.

I miss you, Mother.

Mildred was still fresh on her mind. If there wasn't a mirror for Geraldine to gaze into during sex, then she often retreated to the memories of her and her mother.

The reverberations of the multiple orgasms Rock had unleashed inside her still tingled through her body. As much as she wanted to dwell on them—and her mother—she knew it was time to meet with Fuchs and get things moving.

"Quickly, finish up already," Geraldine commanded.

Rock dried off his face and checked it for gunk once more in the mirror before leaving the bathroom.

"Follow me," she said.

The two of them made their way out of the bedroom and around the extravagant castle. After cutting through several rooms, Geraldine and Rock approached the elevated terrace at the back of the mansion.

Awaiting them at a small table on the stone overlook with a mug resting in front of him was Adolpho Fuchs. He promptly raised his drink and smiled.

“My lady,” Fuchs said, sipping his coffee.

The cold winds flowed in from the violent seas. The salt water stretched as far as the eye could see, swirling with fury, and a massive cluster of dark clouds hung above the gloomy sky.

“Is it finished?” Geraldine asked.

“Almost.”

“What’s the holdup? I thought you said any day now.”

“Zhis is true. It’s just—”

“I don’t have all day,” Geraldine said.

Fuchs glared at Rock. “Zhe extra work I’ve had to do in regards to collecting zhe children has set me back some. Maybe, if zhe butler can help me with one thing, we shall be back on schedule.”

“Of course he will.” Geraldine shifted her fiery gaze to Rock. “And he’d better do it right.”

“Wonderful. I fear zhat even with all my planning, I cannot be sure zhat one of zhe boys would not be too much for me.”

Fuchs looked at Rock’s muscular physique, clearly admiring it. Geraldine imagined he wished they could trade places. She knew the feeling of disgust that old age could create in a person’s mind all too well.

“Zhe others I can handle . . .” Fuchs continued. “But for zhis young man in particular, we will require someone with great strength.”

Geraldine stared at Rock, adding pressure as she awaited his response.

“Understood,” Rock finally said.

“Excellent,” Geraldine said.

She turned back to Fuchs. “What about the others?”

The old man grinned. “I’ve got zhem under control.”

“You had better,” Geraldine said. “I’m growing impatient, and the more I have to wait, the nastier things are going to get.”

“I shall not disappoint you, my lady,” Fuchs said.

Geraldine nodded. “Good.”

She turned, looking off the terrace into the backyard. The entire space, except for the garden, was filled with an enormous structure. The monstrosity was something they’d been working on for some time. Some areas of the construction appeared to be inflated—like one big, giant

bouncy house. Some were on the ground, while others were elevated, leading up to about the height of a three-story building. Other parts of the formation that sat on the ground, attached to the inflatable spaces, were encased in steel. The strange, swollen tubing and metal appeared to shape out a series of interconnected, oblong rooms.

"After our little mishap on the swings, it's clear that my magnum opus is far from ready," Geraldine said. "But I'm no spring chicken, and life is . . . *precious*. The reality is I could drop dead any day now, long before the construction of my true masterpiece—my Playground—is complete."

"Do not say such zhings," Fuchs begged.

"I know," Geraldine continued. "I can't imagine how difficult such a change would be for you boys. I know you'd both be utterly lost without me."

They both stayed quiet.

"But that's the reality." Geraldine stared at the strange structure with a deep sense of pride stewing inside her. "Something is better than nothing. While my Playground will have more to the imagination than one can dream, while it will test the fabric of several unfortunate souls, in the meantime I simply must have some fun. These games that one might find around a playground or in any family's backyard will serve as an entertaining warm-up. We shall make the best of it."

"Trust in me, my lady," Fuchs said, "zhis prototype may surprise you with its ingenuity. I have molded your ideas in a way zhat harnesses great imagination. While zhe scale of our architecture will be condensed, it is important to remember zhat bigger is not always better. I promise, you will be pleasantly shocked. In some ways, zhe prototype will be much like zhe Playground under construction in zhe bowels of zhis castle. But in other ways, it will be quite different. Zhe prototype will be beautiful, unique, and exciting in its own right. And it will serve as zhe *perfect* precursor to your Playground."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Geraldine asked, suddenly grinning from ear to ear. "Go and fetch me those goddamn children."

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HIDDEN HATRED

Fuchs adjusted the putty on his face, distorting his natural skin to make it appear much smoother and youthful. The wig made his scalp itch, but he would have to deal with it. As he stared into the rearview mirror, he felt confident that he was staring at a different person than the one who had dropped off the donation days ago.

He knew the feeling all too well. For most of his life he'd been a different person. Thoughts of his childhood in Germany flooded back. It wasn't easy being a brilliant boy. He didn't excel in sports, or anything that would've protected him from stronger children. His family, upbringing, and environment had been cruel and harsh. The lone gift God had granted him was his 155 IQ.

As he stared down the alley behind the Boys & Girls Club, he saw several young children playing joyfully—the way children deserved to in the early, carefree years of development. Fuchs had no such luck. Instead of revering him for his brilliance, the other children had regularly antagonized him or beat him senseless.

One particular day haunted him worse than any of the beatings. He recalled it vividly. He had been on his way to school when a group of older boys had snatched him up and carried him to a wooded area not far from the educational building.

They spent the entire day drinking, abusing him, and mocking him. After stripping him naked and tying him to the trunk of a tree, one of the boys opened his backpack and retrieved a pencil. He recalled the distinct discomfort—like a horrible itch that Fuchs could never quite scratch—he'd

felt deep in his rectum when they drunkenly sodomized him with the writing utensil.

Sometime later he was dragged out of the woods and left hogtied and naked on the lawn of the school. When the bell rang and all the children flooded the grounds, they saw his shaking, nude body—gag in his mouth, shit staining the backside of both his legs.

The laughter from the shocked crowd had been deafening. But more shocking than the expressions in the crowd was the lack of justice that followed the incident. Fuchs' trauma and humiliation saw no retribution. The entire student body—and, even more disturbingly, the faculty—viewed the vile incident as nothing more than a harmless prank. The boys were given a slap on the wrist, and everyone at the school continued to enjoy the running joke, branding Fuchs as "Stinky" from that day forward.

Stinkend, Fuchs thought in his native language.

When the Nazi party eventually plucked Fuchs from the college ranks, realizing his ingenuity, he had looked forward to joining them. Not because he believed in Hitler's plan, but because his rank would make him a master.

Those who'd besmirched his name, humiliated and disrespected him, would pay. Maybe not directly, but maybe their families would—maybe the women or men they loved with every fiber of their souls would breathe the gas he leaked out in the chambers. Maybe they would be torn apart by the very contraptions of which he was the architect.

Bastards.

Fuchs tried not to get too lost in his own head—he was there for a reason. He looked at the box of Lunchables on the floor of the passenger seat. The pepperoni-and-cheese images on the food did not tickle his appetite.

Ugh . . . disgusting.

He shuddered, moving on from the thought of the nasty processed food. Focusing on the seat beside him, Fuchs' attention shifted to the pair of Reebok Pump sneakers as he took hold of them. He knew what the shoes represented. For certain children, they symbolized victory—something he'd never tasted as a child.

After being secretly exonerated for his war crimes by the Americans via Project Paperclip, a void had been left inside him. The work he was then doing for the USA wasn't anywhere near as fulfilling as what he'd done in

Germany. His bloodlust and the unending hunger for bottomless vengeance had only multiplied over the years.

When he first met Geraldine, he didn't think he would be able to satiate the darkness, but the murder of children actually excited him more than anything that had happened during the war.

Zhey were zhe ones who tried to destroy me, Fuchs said. *But zhere is only one destroyer now. Zhey shall feel my wrath.*

He noticed the two sisters he'd watched in the gym the prior day make their way to the exit. They were talking on the front steps, a look of confusion hanging on the older one's face.

I thought you would never leave.

Fuchs looked down at the shoes and grinned, reaching for the door handle.

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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

“It’s just weird though,” Steph said, still looking around the front steps of the Boys & Girls Club.

“What?” Kayla asked.

“Coach Cal *never* misses practice . . . and he gets so mad if we do. Where the heck could he be?”

“Maybe his car broke down or—”

“Girls,” a male voice with a strange accent interjected.

They turned to see a man holding a pair of Reebok Pump basketball sneakers.

As Steph examined him, she couldn’t put her finger on exactly what felt odd about the man, but her instincts were telling her something was off.

“You’re exactly right,” the man said. “He had some car issues.”

“How do you know?” Steph asked.

“Because he asked me to be here to surprise you. Coach paid me to come here and take your shoe sizes.”

“Really?” Kayla asked, eyes entranced by the sneakers. “How come?”

“He was so pleased by both of your efforts on zhe court, zhat he wanted to purchase Reebok Pumps for each of you from my store—zhe Sneaker Hut.”

“Oh my gosh!” Kayla squealed.

Steph’s heart beat with excitement. She’d been dying to get her hands on a pair.

Coach Cal is so amazing, Steph thought. *I’m not surprised that he would do something like this.*

“Coach is the best!” Kayla said.

“Zhat he is,” the man replied. “But it is a shame zhat he is not here.”

“What about tomorrow?” Steph asked.

“I wish I could,” the man said. “But I’m leaving on business. I won’t be back in town for at least anozher two months . . . I am sorry.”

As the man turned away with the sneakers, Kayla looked on the verge of tears. It made Steph sad. It wasn’t often that something nice happened to them. It was a shame that Coach Cal’s surprise had to be spoiled.

“There’s gotta be a way!” Kayla cried.

The man turned back around. “Well . . . zhere may be. I could quickly do zhe measurement in my car. It would only take a minute or so. Zhen, I could have zhe sneakers delivered to zhe Boys & Girls Club for you tomorrow.”

Steph looked the man over again. His odd voice and weird look continued to throw up red flags.

“Yay!” Kayla said, but she looked at Steph for approval.

“It would just take a minute,” the man reminded.

How else would he know about Coach Cal and how we’ve both been wanting the Pumps? Steph reasoned.

“Please, Steph . . .” Kayla begged.

“Okay,” Steph said. “But our parents are expecting us home soon, so it has to be fast.”

“Absolutely,” the man said. “Follow me, right zhis way.”

As Steph and her sister made their way into the alley toward the car, she started to feel better about the situation. The vehicle was beautiful—much too nice for a bad person to drive.

“Right inside here,” the man said, reaching for the door handle.

Steph watched as the door opened, revealing a spacious backseat with nothing in it.

“Get inside,” the man said.

“Why?” Steph asked, furrowing her brow. “Can’t you just measure our feet out here?”

When the man tossed the sneakers in the backseat and reached into his coat, Steph got a terrible feeling in her belly. And when he produced the Luger pistol and pointed it at her sister, she realized they’d made a terrible mistake.

The man’s eyes were no longer kind. It was like he was a completely different person than before as he growled, “Shut up and get in zhe fucking car, now.”

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RAW DEAL

Marco Estrada watched the TV screen as Ken finished M. Bison with a roundhouse kick. He'd beaten the game and CPU countless times. When the end credits started to roll, he felt nothing.

What would've made him feel something was if he'd instead had a friend beside him to share in the victory—or, even better, to battle against him. But friends didn't come easy for him. As he turned off the Super Nintendo, he felt his nerves starting to get to him.

It's already dark outside, Marco thought, looking out the window. *I'm gonna have to leave soon . . .*

As he moved to his computer desk, Marco slurped, sucking up the spit from his retainer. He popped the piece out and set it in a plastic blue case. Booting up his computer, he then grabbed the bag of Cheetos and took a swig of Crystal Pepsi.

When the screen finally came to life, Marco searched and started the MS-DOS game *Battle Chess*. The game was one of his favorites. Before his family had uprooted and moved to Rhode Island, Marco was the top kid amongst the local chess players. But where they lived now, there wasn't even a chess club. Finding like-minded kids his age felt impossible.

Marco understood why they had to make the move—the proof that his father's decision was a smart one was all around him. In their last house, Marco didn't have a computer or Super Nintendo. It took his father's newly found success to attain such comforts. But as a result of the move, the few friends that he'd made over the years had been sacrificed.

As Marco started to play and moved his pawn forward, he thought about how much he hated going to school at Saint Leo's. The nuns that ran his classes were all so old and mean, and his fellow classmates all looked at him like he was a freak.

He glanced at his arm, knowing his brown skin was most likely responsible. The Irish Catholic school had no children in his grade that looked like him.

I wish I was like them . . .

When they talked to him it always felt like they were secretly laughing. They would ask him dumb questions then criticize his answers.

Does your dad work at Taco Bell? they'd ask.

No, he's an accountant . . .

Yeah, right! The only number he knows is Juan! they'd yell.

They treated Marco like he was some kind of toy they could pull the string on at any time for their own entertainment. He'd heard them whisper about him, making jokes about his race and frequent slurping noise he made because of his retainer.

When they weren't calling him "Metal Mouth," they were calling him "Taco Bitch." Marco had never felt so alienated in his entire life. It felt like they were one step away from kicking his ass. He'd seen some of the other kids at the school get into fights before, so he knew the fear wasn't irrational.

With the thought of violence still fresh on his mind, Marco reached for his soda. But just as his hand touched the can, there was a knock on the door. He yelped, knocking the soda over. Before Marco could lift it up, the liquid leaked into his computer tower vent, reaching the circuit breaker and causing it to spark and short out.

"Oh, no," his father said, peeking inside the door.

"Noooooooo!" Marco yelled, picking up the can.

His father disappeared and returned with a towel. He cleaned up the mess, but they soon realized there was no saving the computer.

"Oh, man," Marco cried. "What the heck happened? It's—it's not turning on now."

"Looks like you fried the circuit board," his father said. "That's what happens when they get wet." He looked at the can. "Your mom already told you not to drink any pop this late. And didn't I tell you to keep liquids away from the computer?"

Marco’s eyes were starting to gloss over. The disappointment on his dad’s face made him even sadder. He started to sob. Losing the computer was like losing a friend—it was the closest thing he had to one.

“I’m sorry,” Marco whispered.

His father’s expression changed from one of annoyance to concern. “It’s okay, Son. Shit happens. I don’t want you to be upset. I know things haven’t been easy. I’ll get you another computer, okay?”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“No problem. Now, I was coming in here to tell you that it’s bedtime. Don’t let a little accident spoil your night. Accidents happen, right?”

Marco wiped the tears away. “Right.”

“Have a good night,” his father said, rubbing Marco’s mushroom haircut.

When his father closed the door, Marco looked out the window. The stress of life shouldn’t be so heavy at his age, should it? He was looking for an escape, and the video games just weren’t cutting it.

He’d heard the other kids at the Boys & Girls Club talking about drugs. How they could change the way you felt. How they were hard to get, and only the cool kids could score them.

Maybe that’s it.

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Maybe, if he could get some drugs, the other kids at Saint Leo's would accept him. Maybe the drugs would bring them together. And if that didn't happen, at least they would help him escape a brutal reality.

He had seen the "This is your brain on drugs!" commercials countless times. Marco had carefully watched the eggs get cracked open and dumped into the hot frying pan. When the translucent goo had started to turn white and flare with oversized bubbles, there was only one thing he'd thought.

I need that . . .

Marco wanted to change how he thought. He didn't want to be the smart one anymore—he wanted to be average and ignorant. That was the reason why he had approached Josh at the Boys & Girls Club. He'd seen him sell to other kids. And that was the reason that, even though it scared the hell out of him, he was about to sneak out of the house for the first time and meet Josh on the playground.

As he got up from bed and popped his retainer back into his mouth, he took a deep breath. Then, turning back to the window, he continued to stare into the night.

Meeting up with Josh is my only hope.

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AN UNCOMFORTABLE CHOICE

In the distance, Rock watched a young Hispanic boy with a mushroom haircut at the rear of the playground. He paced back and forth, like he was nervously waiting for someone to show. It was the exact same area the larger boy that Fuchs had given him the tip about had led him to. The large boy had waited in that very same spot before Rock had descended upon him, subdued him, and ultimately stuffed him into the trunk.

Just like he'd done when snatching up Matthew, Rock had been careful to pounce on the boy unexpectedly. There wasn't much of a struggle—Rock's ridiculous muscle mass had seen to it that things went smoothly. Because he'd already been told that the boy was bigger, Rock had taken the extra precaution of wearing a mask. He knew if the boy was going to have even the slimmest chance of escaping The Borden Estate, keeping his face hidden was of the utmost importance.

Rock looked at the passenger seat where the black mask sat alongside the wet rag still soaked through with chloroform.

That must be who he was meeting, Rock thought.

Knowing that detail instantly created more questions.

That's another loose end. Fuchs said no one gave a shit about the kid, but if someone was expecting to meet 'em right now . . . well, that's gonna create added interest in his whereabouts.

That was the logical side of Rock's brain speaking. That side screamed at him, trying to convince him that leaving the boy there wasn't a good idea—that it could lead to trouble for him.

But if I take 'em . . . that might be it. For both of 'em.

His heart ached as he considered the potential scenarios that awaited the boy. Images of Matthew's melted flesh and crispy body bled into his mind. The horrifying aftermath still gave him nightmares and polluted his daydreams.

I shouldn't . . .

Then, yet another side of Rock's darker subconscious forced its way to the surface of his mind like a malignant nugget of brain tissue.

But she would be so happy with me.

He was so starved for kindness, just a simple word of encouragement would've been the equivalent of a dope fiend getting a fix. Instead of Geraldine dragging his name through the mud—and potentially tea-bagging him with her infected hemorrhoids again—she might instead smile at him or tell him he did a good job.

Would she?

Rock couldn't be sure. He'd been called useless so much, now he truly believed it. This was his chance to finally prove her wrong, prove *himself* wrong, and to be accepted as family. The physical size difference between Geraldine and Rock had never mattered. She had him beaten between the ears. He'd never felt bigger or stronger than her. She'd always kept him subdued with negativity and feelings of irrelevance.

Coming home with two could change everything. Maybe for one night she'll see me as her son . . . or love me in a way that's not so sick.

Even though what Rock was doing felt wrong, over time his psyche had started to warp along with the vile environment around him. He was a product of Geraldine Borden, even if she wouldn't claim him as her own.

His firm grip on the steering wheel suddenly loosened as he looked back down at his mask and the rag. Regardless of the choice he made, it was important that none of the kids saw his face. While he wasn't sure any of them would make it through the unforgiving gauntlet that Fuchs continued to brag about, on the off chance one did, he liked to think he might be able to convince Geraldine to reward them. But if any of the children got a look at him, that wouldn't even be a possibility.

I hope it's you, kid. I hope it's you.

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LATE LUNCH

As Danny exited the Boys & Girls Club, a feeling of confusion swirled inside him.

Where's Steph and Kayla? Danny thought. *They said they were gonna be here today. Hope nothing happened . . .*

The sweat on his brow was still fresh. He'd been able to practice gymnastics inside for a little while, but then he figured that it might be best for him to leave, since he was alone. Teddy and Jazmine often started lurking around in the later afternoon.

Wish Josh was here at least. But I guess I can just study in the library for an hour until my mom comes and picks me up.

Thankfully the library was just across the street, so he could quickly return when his mother arrived. As Danny entered the building, the thought of his mom made him recall how she kept asking him about the girls she'd seen him hanging out with. Whether it was Steph and Kayla or any other girl, females seemed to flock to him. He was able to befriend them easily enough, and they always seemed to have so much in common—much more than he had with most boys.

Which one's your girlfriend? She'd constantly hound him with the question.

They're all girls and they're all my friends, he'd reply.

His mother fancied him as some kind of ladies' man. Danny didn't know what she wanted from him. He hung out with girls plenty.

Why's she have to tease me about it so much? God, she's annoying sometimes . . .

The truth was, Danny didn’t know how he felt about it. All the other boys talked about girls in a different way—like more than friends. While he wasn’t sure about his own feelings, he at least knew he didn’t feel *that*. In fact, it was the boys he felt more nervous and shy around. But he wasn’t sure if that was a result of not fitting in or something else.

At that moment, Danny was actually glad he was heading into the library for some alone time. He felt like every one of his relationships and interactions was under a microscope—if not by him, then by his mother.

He found a corner of the library that no one was occupying. The spot was also near the side exit so he could leave quickly to meet his mom when the time came. He set his bag on the table and removed a book from it.

Goosebumps was a relatively new series, but it had grown immensely in popularity. Danny had ordered *Monster Blood* from the Scholastic Book Fair flier passed around by the teachers at school. Having just finished *Stay Out of the Basement* several days ago, he was anxious to get started.

Footsteps suddenly crept up behind him. When Danny turned, he noticed a man standing with his back to him, sifting through a case of books a few yards away.

His attention quickly returned to the book. The horror stories helped him escape and not think about the questions he didn’t understand let alone know how to answer yet. But his belly was rumbling. Before he could focus on the story, he needed to eat.

As he opened his backpack, Danny’s pog tube stared back at him. Recalling what the tube protected, he couldn’t help but grin.

I gotta have another look at them before I eat.

Opening up the plastic tube, Danny quickly laid out the special *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* pog set. He still couldn’t believe that the McDonald’s promotion had allowed him to score the magnificent collection prior to its official release.

Teddy and Jazmine are never getting these.

They’d asked him about them several times, but he always lied. When they wanted to see them, he’d say he forgot them that day. If they wanted to play a game for keeps in the gym at the Boys & Girls Club, then he’d left them in his locker at school. He knew what they were trying to do, and he wasn’t going to let that happen. He would cherish his *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* pog set to the grave.

Danny scooped up the pogs, put them back into their protective tube, and slipped it in his pocket. He returned his focus to his backpack. When he looked inside at the Lunchables, he raised an eyebrow. Danny glared at the packaging that displayed the pepperoni-and-cheese contents.

Thought Mom packed ham *and cheese today . . . Oh, well.*

Tearing open the packaging, he quickly started making the mini pizzas and chomping them down. In just a short time, the entire package was empty. Feeling satisfied, Danny discarded the trash in a small can in the corner of the room. But as he returned to his table, he started to feel woozy. Vision blurring, he grabbed the chair, doing his best to bridge himself up.

What's . . . going on . . . ?

"My boy," the man near the bookshelf said. "Are you all right?"

Danny could feel the man's hands holding him up as all the strength left his body.

"You look like you're going to be ill," the man continued. "Zhere is a bathroom zhis way."

As he grabbed Danny's bag and helped him walk forward, he realized the door they were headed toward wasn't the bathroom.

It was the exit.

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DARK PRIDE

“Getting more than one is nice,” Geraldine said, turning her attention to Fuchs. “But thrice?” She smiled before glaring at Rock. “I’m afraid you’ve been outdone.”

“Anyzhing for you, my lady,” Fuchs said.

She could see the hurt in Rock’s affection-starved eyes, and she took pleasure in his discomfort. The big lug had never been much use to her. And while it was good to finally see him earning his stay at The Borden Estate, Geraldine continued with her prior mindset. She wasn’t about to overinflate his ego when he was only just now beginning to prove his worth.

Her face turned into a scowl. “Still, it should’ve never taken this long in the first place—I could’ve dropped dead waiting.”

Geraldine gazed out off the terrace. The monstrous contraption that took up most of the backyard stared back at her. The children—the one thing her barren body would not allow her to have naturally—were now hers. And they would pay—God Himself would pay for such an unfair mistake. The boys and girls she’d arranged to be plucked from the bloodlines of random, undeserving miscreants would soon get exactly what they deserved.

Exactly *what they deserve,* Geraldine thought. I *shall determine if they deserve this existence.* I *shall determine if they are worthy of avoiding the ghastliest of fates.*

Turning back to the men, she made a fist and held it in front of her. “But I shall not wait another moment. Come.” She waved her bony fist, calling on them to follow her. “It is time we get the children.”

“My lady,” Fuchs sheepishly interrupted. “I’m afraid I must ask for one final extension of your patience.”

Geraldine froze and turned slowly back, picking at the hairy mole on her face with agitation. The rage inside her was uncontrollable. She couldn’t wait to steer the children toward their doom.

“Is the prototype finished, Mr. Fuchs?” she asked.

“Somezhing like zhat,” Fuchs replied.

“Well, is it, or isn’t it?!” she screamed, watching fear blossom in both their eyes as she waited for an answer.

“I know you’ve been waiting a long time already,” Fuchs said. “But you must understand, I wanted zhis to be special. After failing you before . . . I have worked extra to ensure zhis prototype is perfection.”

“What is it you must do?” Geraldine asked, gritting her glistening dentures.

“Zhat’s just it. It’s a surprise—somezhing so marvelous zhat I cannot explain. I can only *show* you. But to show you, I will require exactly one more day.”

Geraldine corralled her excitement and anger, realizing that the scientist was going out of his way to ensure what she experienced was every bit as good as what she’d been imagining—or maybe better.

What does one more day matter?

“All right,” Geraldine said. “You have until tomorrow morning.”

As Fuchs grinned, Geraldine turned to her adopted son. Compared to Fuchs, Rock was useless—she saw him as nothing more than a combination of butler and submissive sex slave.

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While Fuchs had failed to crack the genetic code or locate a man capable of planting a seed inside her, at least he'd made good on her secondary plan. He brought her the wicked promise of retribution.

What's that oaf ever done for me?

"And one more zhing," Fuchs said. "I know you have penned all zhe Playground rules for zhe prototype. But I must ask zhat you trust me to write zhe rules for zhe first two areas, as not to spoil zhe surprise."

"Have it your way, but whatever it is that you're cooking up had *better* be worth it."

Fuchs grinned again. "Trust in me and you shall not be disappointed."

Geraldine turned, looking out into the backyard of her massive cliffside estate. The property was the perfect place for such nefarious activities. Surrounded by ocean, the only way inside was past the towering, electrified gates.

She reassured herself that she could wait one more day.

It will be well worth it. Once the games begin, there will be no one who can disturb us. There will be no one who will stop those children from getting exactly *what they deserve.*

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THE DEMONSTRATION

“Don’t move,” a gruff voice said. “Not until we tell you to.”

The gag in Kayla’s mouth prevented her from speaking, so she nodded instead. While the bag over her face gave her a claustrophobic feeling, it also made breathing more difficult. She tried her best to keep calm.

Kayla felt a large pair of hands undoing the ropes that bound her arms and legs together. As she lay helplessly on her side, the panic inside her was intense—almost painful. She didn’t even know if her sister was with her any longer. Steph was her security blanket. Her big sister had always been there during the worst times. She was the one who came up with the plans and made Kayla feel safe. Steph had a way of always finding a way to give her hope.

But Kayla had no idea what was going on. She didn’t know how long she’d been held captive. All she knew was what she remembered. That odd man forcing them into the car at gunpoint. After that, the rope, gags, and bags were used to subdue them, and they were driven to an unknown location. The cage Kayla had been confined to was small. She’d sat on the cold steel for God knew how long—a few bathroom breaks were the only thing that broke up the monotony. Everything was a mystery—a big, terrifying mystery.

She had the worst feeling. A bubbling dread that rumbled in her stomach like lava inside a raging furnace. It was a deeper fear than any she’d ever experienced at home. Far worse than anything her parents and the cyclical dysfunction they fostered had ever made her feel.

“Stay strong,” the man whispered. “And listen *carefully*.”

His footsteps carried him away from her, until she heard the sound of a metal door closing and locking. She then heard the crackle of a speaker powering on.

“Little girl . . .” an elderly woman’s voice said. “Take that bag off your head and the gag out of your mouth.”

Kayla remained hesitant, slowly reaching for her head.

“It’s okay, I give you permission,” the elderly woman continued. “Go ahead.”

When Kayla removed the bag, she was both terrified and confused by what she saw. Surrounding her in a circle lay several other children. Each was completely immobilized—hogtied and sporting the same bag on their head that she’d just removed from her own. Beyond the circle of squirming children was the metal door that she’d heard. But around the metal entrance was an entirely different material—a squishy, balloon-like material that reminded her of the bouncy houses she’d seen kids play in on TV.

The floor was made of plywood and painted neon-pink. There were squiggles and various colors and shapes over different areas. The walls and ceiling were all comprised of the same multicolored, inflated nylon that surrounded the steel door. The rainbow of diverse hues wasn’t confined to the structure’s materials, but also the rows of lights that were strung up everywhere.

As Kayla continued to take everything in, she noticed the only other exit—or entrance—in sight was opposite the big metal door. A deep, dark tunnel that stretched far into the sagging hallway, leading to an unknown but undeniably frightening destination.

“Now remove the masks of all the other children,” the old woman instructed.

Kayla did as she was told, but as she took hold of the brown sack over the first child’s head, she noticed two additional details. Maybe even more upsetting than the dark and eerie environment of the space was the yellow coffin-shaped box not far from them. There was a large circular clockface affixed to the top half of the coffin. Still even more confusing than the casket was a glass fishtank with a white rat inside. The tank sat on a medium-height platform, and a single clear tube had been fed through the roof of the inflatable ceiling directly into the tank.

Polly? Kayla thought, recognizing the rodent.

“Quickly,” the old woman growled. “We haven’t got all day. Just do what you’re told. Don’t say a word or do anything else, or I promise you’ll regret it!”

The old woman’s screaming rattled Kayla, making her immediately refocus on the mask. When she yanked it free, she wasn’t surprised.

It was Josh.

The fact that he looked afraid disturbed her. He was always the tough one. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

If Josh is scared, then I should be too . . .

She wanted to say something, but the wicked woman kept her fearful. Instead, she obeyed her commands and went down the line, removing each child’s mask one by one.

Danny was next. Kayla was grateful to see him. Not that she didn’t trust Josh too, but she had just spent more time with Danny, and they’d grown closer.

The boy with tan skin and the mushroom cut that she revealed next was another kid she’d seen around the Boys & Girls Club. While she wasn’t friends with Marco, they played on the same team in the gym a few times.

Kayla immediately recognized the next kid. She’d cuddled up for security in that sweater many times. She was both relieved and grateful to know that her sister was still with her. Just the sight of Steph’s face helped her confidence begin to return. While Steph looked frightened, she held the weight of it well—something she’d been doing for years.

The way Steph looked at her made it feel like she was relaying a message with her eyes: *Just try to stay calm, and do what she says.*

The last two kids were closest to the yellow coffin. The box gave her the creeps, but she knew the bags over their heads needed to be removed to appease the domineering voice. Something about the way the woman spoke made her nauseous. It was like the woman didn’t possess the slightest touch of warmth.

As Kayla pulled off the final two sacks, she wasn’t happy to find Teddy and Jazmine. Her gut sank. She and the rest of the kids were in enough trouble without a couple of bullies being unleashed alongside the rest of them.

“Good, I’m glad you can listen,” the woman said. “Now I would like each and every one of you to turn your attention to the rat in the box. This

rat symbolizes each one of you—and, more importantly, what could happen to each one of you if you don't follow the rules."

The poor rat's chest was popping in and out rapidly. The stress of a strange environment and all the attention on Polly must've been overwhelming. After being coddled for so long by Josh, separation anxiety was taking its toll.

"I know many of you are thinking that the material surrounding you can easily be cut through. You're probably even imagining a quick escape. But let me assure you, that's not the case. The only way out of this place is *forward*. But, in case there are any doubters, I will allow you to see the repercussions for such a mistake firsthand."

A sucking noise suddenly commenced, and a purple gas began filling the clear tube. As it funneled into the tank, Polly started to panic, rushing to the corner of the terrarium and crying. Kayla watched as the rat's battle with panic was only amplified by Josh struggling on the ground. He desperately wanted to be free of his ropes so he could rush to save his rodent friend. If Kayla truly wanted to, she might've been able to free him.

But she didn't dare.

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“The walls of the structure that surrounds you have not been inflated with air,” the old woman explained. “The purple gas you see filling our rat friend’s enclosure will kill you . . . but not right away. First, your breathing will slow, followed by your lungs liquifying. Then your skin begins to bleed and come apart, and I promise . . . each and every one of you will be in an indescribable deal of pain for some time before it’s finished.”

As Kayla watched Polly try to evade the purple fog, she knew it was an impossible task. The gas invaded the rat’s orifices, and before long the clean, white rodent was caked in crimson. Blood oozed from the creature’s eyes, ears, rectum, and mouth. As she twitched violently and slammed into the walls of her prison, clumps of hair and skin started to rip from her body. Stamps of blood kissed the glass of the tank as the creature tried desperately to escape the gas. But as her body started to slow, through the purple fog Polly’s fat, pink tail turned into a sickening porridge that looked like a mixture of dissolved bubble gum and infectious discharge.

It was painful to watch and made Kayla feel sick. But the only thing worse than watching Polly die was when she turned away from the ghastly sight and caught a glimpse of the agony in Josh’s eyes.

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TIME IS VICIOUS

As Josh watched Polly turn into mush, his heart did the same. All the memories flashed through his head. Those sleepless nights where he wondered if his father was ever coming home, or why his mother had taken off so early that his memory didn't even have a record of her. All the times he cried himself to sleep with Polly in his arms, wondering why he wasn't good enough for his parents or this world. Why everyone seemed to look at him not like a human but a dirty piece of trash. In those horrible moments, Polly was the only one there for him.

And now she was gone.

As the tears continued to pour down Josh's face, he bit down hard on his gag and unleashed a muffled tirade of swear words—not that anyone could've deciphered them.

"Now that our little demonstration has concluded," the old woman continued, "look back at the metal door."

Josh tried to tilt his head along with the other kids hogtied on the floor. The metal door had a colorful sign fixed to it that read: *Playground Rules*.

Why the hell are they doing this?! Josh wondered.

He also wondered who these mysterious people were and why they'd chosen him and some of his friends for their sick game.

"I'd like to formally welcome you all to my Playground," the old woman continued. "Now, as you know, every playground has its rules, and this one is no different. The creator of this lovely prototype has assured me that you're all in for quite a treat. The space is essentially a series of inflated tubes—similar to ones I'm sure many of you have played on in the past.

These levels and tubes will lead you to several rooms. You can tell you're about to approach a new room when you see a metal door like this one. But the door to the next area will not open until you complete the challenge."

Josh's heart was now pounding even harder. The feeling of blood rushing around in his system made him feel lightheaded. He was trying to make sense of what the old woman was saying, but it all sounded so crazy.

"What is the challenge exactly, you ask? Well, that will depend on the room you've entered. You must read the sign on the inside of the door that says *Playground Rules*. And I suggest you follow those rules very carefully. In fact, you should follow them like your life depends on it."

It didn't make Josh feel any better when he noticed that some of the other kids had started to cry too. He knew the situation was bad, but it seemed to keep getting worse. The odds of it being some kind of sick joke suddenly felt slim to none.

"I will read you the first set of Playground Rules," the woman said. "But moving forward, it will be up to you." She cleared her throat. " 'Time is precious; it goes fast. Eyes on the clock as you find your path. Don't be a snail, don't linger long, or you shall feel . . . Mildred's scorn' . . ."

The hand on the clock embedded in the yellow casket spun wildly and its glass cracked. The gears inside leapt out of the device, triggering the lid of the upright casket to creak open. What it revealed shook Josh to his core.

"Little girl," a man's voice with a heavy German accent suddenly cut in. "Free as many of your friends as you can. But do so quickly or meet your doom. And know zhat for zhe duration of your journey, Mildred will always be just one step behind you. So be sure to move quickly—time is precious."

Josh watched as Kayla immediately squatted beside her sister. She removed the gag from her mouth, then moved onto the ropes binding her hands and legs. As the girl struggled to free her sister, Josh's eyes darted to the monstrosity stepping out of the coffin.

The robotic frame was the size of a smaller adult, and clinging to the steel were several sheets of rotten skin and even some of the flesh of an elderly woman. Mildred—as the old woman had referred to her as—had a sickening pair of breasts affixed to her torso. The chewed nipples and wrinkled meat looked like a mix of shabby taxidermy and fetid beef jerky.

Her nether regions housed more spoiled flesh and even some pale pubic hairs. The discolored portions were riddled with many maggots and accompanied by a horde of agitated flies. As she took a step, her fermented

beaver exposed itself along with a cluster of putrid butt fat and decaying muscles that appeared to be bonded to the steel framework.

Mildred's demonic eyes glowed an eerie shade of blue. Wispy white hairs affixed to her chrome skull hung slightly in front of them. The mask of skin stretched over her face looked dead and buried—as if it had been dug up and peeled off a corpse's face. But maybe the most distinct part of Mildred was her hands. Each of her chrome, pointed fingertips pierced through the putrid skin that had been slid over her hands like gloves. Mildred was a menace to society, and even worse, an immediate threat to everyone in the room.

As Kayla continued to try and loosen the knots tying Steph, Josh flailed, desperately trying to get her attention.

Mechanical noises ensued as Mildred made her way out of the coffin, mechanical step by mechanical step. As the creepy robot stepped up to Teddy, he squirmed like a worm being pulled apart. His tough-guy act quickly faded as she aimed her index finger at his chest. Cones of metal expanded from the point, elongating it to the size of a walking cane. As the tip punched past his pectoral, the force was so grand that it ripped through his shoulder and shattered his collar bone.

Blood squirted from the horrifying wound as Mildred lifted Teddy up like a big, bleeding corndog.

Josh turned back to the girls as they shrieked in unison. Finally, he was able to catch Steph's eye. She looked back at her sister with tears running, quickly realizing that Kayla was petrified and still unable to loosen the ropes.

"Kayla!" Steph yelled, terror fueling her. "What's going on?! You've gotta get these ropes off me!"

"I—I can't figure it out!" Kayla shrieked.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Steph was panicking. Her eyes returned to Josh. "Quick, take that rope out of Josh's mouth!"

Josh could see Mildred had retracted her finger and was now finishing Teddy with her brute strength. His body looked a mess as she used her hands to pull his injured arm from his torso like a hungry monkey tearing apart a warm chicken dinner.

Kayla ran over and removed the gag.

"She can't get the ropes off!" Steph screeched. "Any ideas?!"

“There—there’s a knife in my pocket!” Josh said just as the rope got out of his mouth. “This side one!” He looked back at Kayla as she pulled the blade out. “Cut me loose and I’ll free your sister! Hurry, that—that thing is gonna get us!”

As he watched the girl fiddle with the blade, Josh wished he would’ve been able to pull out the pocketknife when he’d initially been kidnapped. But the big man had come out of nowhere. Still, maybe if he had, and used it to defend himself, then none of them would be in this mess. He had no way of knowing. Everything had happened so fast. Before he could even think, there’d been a sack over his head. He quickly moved on from the memory and focused on the task at hand.

Kayla toyed with the pocketknife, still confused as to how to use it. Meanwhile, Josh watched the scene unfolding behind her. Mildred now had her spikey thumb hooked under the roof of Teddy’s mouth and the other fingers had pushed his eyeballs deep into his skull and curved into his eye sockets. It was like the killer cyborg was gripping a bowling ball.

With her other hand holding his cranium steady, Mildred pulled all the meat, bone, and cartilage from the center of his face. When the nose and structure below broke off, a sickening sight stared back at Josh. A wet, bleeding crater of gore quivered where part of Teddy’s frontal lobe was peeking out as the boy’s mashed eyes jittered like butterfly wings.

“Pull the fucking blade out!” Josh cried. “Th-that metal piece! Pinch it between your fingers and pull! Do it quick or we’re all dead!”

“Kayla, just stay calm,” Steph said. “I know you can do it.”

Amid the pure carnage the sobbing girl finally managed to focus. The blade slipped out.

“I-I’ve got it!” Kayla cried.

“Quick, cut Josh’s ropes!” Steph said.

As Kayla began to cut the twine with the knife, Josh watched Mildred drop Teddy’s lifeless body—or what was left of it. The bloody, broken pile of gore was left twitching while the cruel robot looked at the other children. Jazmine was the next closest in proximity, but Marco and Danny were right behind her.

Josh was distracted by the feeling of the rope giving way. Once his arms were free, he turned and took the knife from Kayla, immediately moving on to her sister. In seconds he was able to slash the ropes.

“Take your sister and run!” Josh commanded.

“W-what about them?” Steph asked.

Mildred placed her heavy steel foot on Jazmine’s chest. The horrifying sound of her tiny bones popping and exploding was like uncooked ramen noodles being crushed. As the crying girl spit up crimson and the blood vessels in her eyes burst, Mildred bent over and took hold of her leg.

“I’ll worry about them!” Josh said, cutting Danny’s ropes free. “Just go!”

The horrifying visual was enough to scare them away. Danny didn’t say a word; he just removed his gag and started screaming at the top of his lungs. He instantly barreled down the dark, sagging hallway after the girls.

When Josh looked at Marco, Mildred was already standing over him. The unforgiving robot was holding a portion of Jazmine’s bloody leg. It had been ripped off at the hip, causing the tissue and veins surrounding the end of the limb and flesh socket to violently quiver.

Before he could think about what his best approach would be, Mildred threw the girl’s leg at his hand, knocking the knife out of it. As the blade stuck into the wooden floor, Josh saw the robot aiming its sharp finger at Marco’s head. But just as the tip extended, Josh took hold of the helpless boy’s ankle and pulled him away.

The spear-like point missed Marco’s brain by inches, but it didn’t miss him entirely. The steel stabbed through the top of his ear, ripping a chunk clean off.

Josh could hear Marco whimpering through his gag as he hoisted the bloody boy over his shoulder. He was grateful to be a little older and stronger—otherwise, they might both have been dead already.

Don’t trip, don’t trip, Josh thought.

As he barreled down the dark hallway, the sound of Mildred’s heavy footsteps remained close. When he reached the end of the tunnel, he found that Danny and the girls had already opened the next metal door. Josh didn’t even pause his stride, and carried Marco inside.

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SURPRISE, SURPRISE

“Mother . . .” Geraldine whispered, in awe of the murderous cyborg. As she stared at the monitor that showed Mildred’s rotten husk slid over the robotic body, her eyes glossed over.

“I told you zhe surprise would be worth zhe wait, my lady,” Fuchs said. “I knew zhat Mildred—with her new programming—would make an immediate example. Zhis is why I required extra time to gather even *more* children and complete her coding.”

“That’s marvelous . . . *she’s* marvelous,” Geraldine said, completely in awe.

She stood up from her chair in the control room. The moment was too big for her to remain seated. The excitement flooded her insides with a Christmas morning vibe.

“None of zhis works—zhe prototype or zhe Playground—wizhout zhe proper motivation. For zhe children to do what we have planned for zhem, zhey must be fearful. Mildred will do just zhat. She will be looming, waiting for zhem to slow zheir pace, indefinitely . . .”

Geraldine heard Fuchs’ words, but as he rambled on, she retreated inside of her mind. She recalled the time frame when she’d been keeping the pieces of her mother’s body in a freezer unit in her bedroom.

Before things went so . . . wrong, Geraldine thought.

It was around the time when she’d first brought Fuchs into the fold. She was still in the process of trying to mend her infertility. Throughout the trying period where Fuchs had worked on her—and her male suitors—like a

science experiment, she had needed *some* sexual satisfaction, a way to just feel human again.

She'd thought about her mother, day and night. Their closeness, the bond they shared, and the coziness Geraldine felt from dwelling on the memories of her mother was the only thing that would comfort her through the experiments.

Finally, the idea had dawned on her: *I'll dig her up . . .*

She'd assigned Rock with the chore of unearthing her mother's carcass from the private plot. After that night, she'd started keeping Mildred's corpse inside the ice box in her room. She'd cut the body into several pieces to make it easier to maneuver.

But she also discovered a hidden perk.

Geraldine would leave the pelvic region to defrost on a towel. And once it thawed out enough, she'd position Mildred's cold cranium on the bed. Then, while she ate out the rotten ass of her mother's cadaver, she could also stare into the thawing eyes inside her decapitated head.

The lustful exercise worked well. It not only helped to calm Geraldine's nerves after Fuchs' testing, but it also gave her some of the best orgasms she'd ever felt—the likes of which she hadn't experienced since her mother was still alive.

When Fuchs learned of Geraldine's ritual, he'd seen it as an opportunity to impress her. Since his fertility experiments had been taxing and made little to no real progress, he knew that he needed to find a way to prove his worth.

And initially, that's exactly what he'd done.

By building Geraldine a life-size sex robot of her dead mother, he knew she would be pleased. Fuchs would transport her back to a time in her life when she was possessed by mindless self-indulgence. He'd made the entire plan sound so perfect when he initially pitched it to Geraldine.

Fuchs had explained how he'd concocted a special oil for Mildred's skin, and even a vaginal lubrication to revitalize her dry cavern. The oil placed on the skin was supposed to preserve the flesh while also creating a lovely synthetic scent to overshadow the smell of death that Geraldine, despite finding a way to put up with it, had never been fond of. This would also allow Mildred to be left in any space or temperature without rotting away. The last thing Geraldine wanted was to be constantly worrying about her mother beyond the grave.

But the outcome Fuchs promised her would not come to fruition. It would instead be the second time that Fuchs dropped the ball.

While the oils did serve to cover up the smell of necrosis, one evening, when Geraldine activated Mildred's pleasure switch, she realized there was an abundance of flies buzzing around her bedroom. But by the time she figured out that the skin oils had *only* covered up the smell of the rot, Mildred was already on top of her. The sex cyborg's perverted programming had triggered Mildred to grind the rancid flesh on her decayed backside against Geraldine.

As the rotten tissue was dragged over her face like a washcloth from Hell, the warm, plump maggots fell out of Mildred's rubbery cunt. Many forced their way into Geraldine's mouth, while some even wormed their way down her esophagus.

The exploding larvae created a ghastly, pulsating gruel—a warm bug sludge that, by the end of the sexual episode, covered Geraldine's entire face. When Mildred finally let her up, clumps of mashed, still-squirming maggots were stuck in her nostrils and pancaked against her forehead and cheeks. They remained there as she rushed to the bathroom to clean herself off.

Geraldine was into a lot of strange things that even she herself understood might border on disgusting to others, but one thing she couldn't do was insects. She *hated* bugs. That was a firm line she'd drawn that was just past necrophilia.

After that horrid incident, Geraldine banished the sex robot version of Mildred. She didn't care what Fuchs did with her, so long as she was removed from the main house.

But the damage to their relationship had been done. Geraldine was so enraged by the botch that she had considered having Rock permanently dispose of the old man.

It wasn't until she thought of the concept of the Playground that she decided to keep Fuchs around. If she was to pull off such an ambitious project, she would require his assistance.

Still, he'd taken the one thing she'd enjoyed from her: the ability to have sex with her dead mother's corpse. It had taken many months for Geraldine to be able to fall back into the sexual fantasies she enjoyed the most. However, any thought of her mother was much different than before. A certain amount of trauma was now attached to her pleasure button.

Sometime later, she found another way to distract herself. With Mildred's corpse no longer in play, Geraldine hatched a fresh idea. She enlisted Rock to expand a massive walk-in closet in her bedroom and create the hall of mirrors. A place where she could go and be away from everyone. And a place where she could enjoy the shape of her body from every angle while she slowly reintroduced her memories of the early days with her mother.

"I kept her in zhe basement freezer for some time," Fuchs explained, interrupting Geraldine's flashback. "I knew zhat, one day, I would find a purpose for her again."

"Such a lovely surprise," Geraldine said.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, my lady."

Geraldine shuddered. "While I would never want to *personally* see her again, it's good to see Mother making her presence felt among the children."

"Zhat it is," Fuchs said with a sinister grin. "And rest assured, zhis is not zhe only surprise I have in store for you. My aim was to prove my worth to you—to amend zhe struggles of zhe past. Today is your day, and nozhing will stop what we have planned."

"Well, consider yourself redeemed," Geraldine said.

Her eyes drifted on to the mutilated bodies of the two children that Mildred had left behind after exiting the frame in pursuit of the others. She then shifted her loving gaze to a glare and aimed it at Rock, to offer him a subtle reminder of his many inadequacies.

"Maybe *you'll* do the same one day," she spat, her tone making it clear that she didn't actually expect Rock to redeem himself.

She grimaced as she pivoted back to the control board and slowly sat down again. The hemorrhoid cushion on her seat squeaked slightly as she got comfortable. She noticed the screen beside the first monitor with the bloody children had gone black. Geraldine furrowed her brow and promptly turned to Fuchs.

"Why can we not see them? Is that a malfunction? We should have a camera in every room. The whole point of this is for us to be able to—"

"Zhere is no malfunction," Fuchs said, smirking with delight. "Remember, some zhings are worth waiting for. Just give zhem a moment and trust zhat *everyzhing* is by design."

Geraldine nodded before glancing back at the other screen. Something kept drawing her eyes.

“Is that one . . . still alive?” she asked, pointing at the girl with the bloody mouth and missing leg.

“You might be right,” Fuchs said. “And no life should go to waste.”

It was like a lightbulb in his head had gone off as Fuchs turned back to Rock and grinned.

“I may have another idea . . .”

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PRIZE IN THE BOX

“It’s gonna hurt a little while,” Josh said. “But if you hold it steady, it should stop the bleeding.”

Marco continued to cry in the dark hallway and slurp his retainer—it was a nervous compulsion and the only thing that seemed to comfort him. But he listened and held the folded sock Josh had removed from his foot against his bloody ear.

“Th-that thing, she killed Teddy!” Kayla yelled. Crying hysterically, she turned to her sister. “W-w-why’d she kill him, Steph?”

Her sister stayed silent as Josh slipped his bare foot back into his sneaker. It was like she was searching for the words as her eyes looked at the Playground Rules sign affixed to the metal door.

“There’s no way to know,” Steph finally said, looking like it was taking everything for her not to break down along with her little sister.

“*Why* doesn’t even matter right now,” Josh said, voice rattling.

Steph consoled her sister, rubbing her shoulders and trying her best to get her to settle down. Danny tried to comfort the girls, but he was just as shaken as they were. The entire group was a mess.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Danny whispered to the girls.

But as Marco examined his body language, it was obvious that Danny didn’t believe what he was saying.

“What *is* this place?” Kayla cried.

“I don’t know,” Josh said. “None of this makes any sense. How did you guys end up here?”

“That strange old man at the Boys & Girls Club,” Steph said. She wiped her own tears away, unable to bottle her dread. “He tricked us into thinking Coach Cal—”

“Guys, it doesn’t even matter how we got here!” Danny interrupted. The fear in his tone was oversaturated and peppered with intermittent sobs. He looked on the verge of a full-on meltdown. “Just like Josh said it doesn’t matter why they’re doing this. They just are.”

The rest of the children stayed quiet.

“Didn’t you hear what they said?” Danny pointed to the metal door where a clock hung, slowly ticking down, right above the Playground Rules sign. “That thing—Mildred, that’s what they called it—it’s waiting right behind this door. And if we don’t figure this out, she’s gonna rip all of us apart, just like she did to Teddy and Jazmine!”

Somehow Danny’s energy helped Marco shake off his shock. He was suddenly calmer and focused. The time factor opened his eyes to the supreme urgency of the situation. If they were to have any kind of chance, they would need to pick up their pace right away.

“How much time does that say?” Marco asked, squinting at the clock.

Josh approached the door for a closer look. “Shit . . . looks like about fifteen minutes!”

All the kids started to panic all over again. The girls remained in tears and Danny broke down. Josh looked overwhelmed, like he couldn’t even think. Marco knew he needed to bring them all together immediately. He wasn’t accustomed to playing the leader, but having his life on the line was the ultimate motivation. It wasn’t something that he had to think about. It just happened.

“Everyone, stop!” Marco yelled, wincing as he held the bloody sock to his torn ear.

The kids all went quiet.

“Like all of you guys, I was scared to death in that last room. But I managed to listen to that creepy old lady closely. This is some kind of sick and scary game. Lucky for us, I’m pretty damn good at games.” Marco stepped up to Josh and nodded. “You saved my butt back there. No one’s ever done something like that for me. I’m going to repay you, starting right now.”

Marco walked up to the door and eyed the Playground Rules sign. “I might not be that strong or tough, but I’m good at figuring stuff out. And if

we want to keep away from Mildred, I need to start now."

"Okay, dude," Josh said, seeming relieved to have a plan and someone taking charge in the crunch. "Thanks. I like where your head's at. Let's . . . let's do this."

"Thank me once we get out of this room," Marco said. "Okay . . . here goes. 'Playground Rules: Before you take to the Playground, you wake at dawn. And eat your breakfast so you grow up strong. There's a prize at the bottom, right where it belongs. Only once you have it will you see that *you* were the prize all along . . .' "

"What the heck does that mean?" Steph cried, frantically shaking.

"I . . . I don't know," Marco said. "We've probably got to go down the hallway to figure it out."

"Well, let's hurry then!" Danny yelled.

The children all ran down the dark hallway. The inflated tubing snaked around the sky-blue floorboards for some distance until it finally spit them out into another room. They were all immediately in awe of the sight that confronted them.

"God . . . what's that smell?" Steph said, cupping her hand over her nose.

The rest of the children did the same, trying to prevent the nauseating aroma from invading their nostrils. It soon became clear what the source of the scent was.

"Gross," Danny said.

A transparent bowl of what appeared to be curdled milk the size and depth of several baby pools stacked on top of each other sat in the center of the room. The dish was taller than Marco and had a big ladder made of countless silver spoons all fused together beside it.

The bowl of rancid dairy was surrounded by four smaller platforms, each with a box of cereal labeled *Playground Puffs*. The design on the front of the box showed a terrified blond boy in pure agony sitting on a swing. A massive fire raged below his feet, causing his skin to char and bubble.

Beyond the bowl and the normal-size boxes of cereal, there was a massive box of *Playground Puffs*. The container was nearly the size of a pickup truck if it had been lifted and turned vertically.

"I'm—I'm scared," Kayla cried.

"It's okay," Steph said. "We're gonna figure it out. It'll be okay, I promise."

“Yeah,” Danny said, “but we do have to figure out what to do, and fast.”

Marco quickly noticed that the only difference between the small boxes and the large one in the back of the room besides their size was the font on the lower portion of the design. On the massive box, in the space where it said A FREE PRIZE INSIDE EVERY BOX!, the colorful letters that made up the word PRIZE were missing.

“What could it mean?” Josh asked, watching Marco study the layout.

“We’ve gotta hurry!” Danny said.

“Calm down,” Josh said. “Let Marco work. Just give him a second to think.”

Danny listened to Josh, his eyes turning to Marco along with the rest of the children as they waited and prayed.

Holding his nose, Marco moved closer to the huge bowl of curdled milk. Amid the nauseating soup of rotten gunk, he noticed a speck of neon pink about the size of a dime pressed against the base of the transparent bowl.

Marco dropped the bloody sock off his ear. “Has the bleeding stopped?”

Josh inspected it. “No, it’s still going.”

Marco spotted a set of goggles with an extra-long breathing tube attached to them lying at the foot of the gigantic bowl under the silver-spoon ladder. As much as it sickened him, he knew what he needed to do.

Marco held up the bloody sock in one hand and pointed at Josh’s foot with the other. “Can you knot this sock to your other one and then tie it around my head as tight as possible? I’d use my own but yours are longer.”

While Josh looked slightly confused, he went along with it. Everyone was aware that time was of the essence. Taking off his other shoe, Josh quickly tied his long tube sock to the bloody one. He then wrapped the length of material around Marco’s head several times, covering the ripped ear as best he could.

Marco felt the cloth tightening around his head and grimaced, trying to prepare himself mentally.

“Okay, it’s done,” Josh said.

Bending over, Marco removed his shirt and snatched up the goggles.

“What are you doing?” Steph asked.

Knowing time was running out, Marco strapped the goggles on. He was pleased that they kept the sock bandage firmly in place. Climbing the ladder of silver spoons, he reached the top and gazed down at the disgusting pool.

He plunged his arm through the curdled crust on the top of the bowl, testing it out. Satisfied that it was just curdled milk, he then used his fingers to worm his way deeper.

“I think this is part of it,” Marco said, gagging as the crack in the rotten milk sent hidden fumes of fermentation up into his face.

“A part of what?” Kayla asked.

“I’ll tell you in a second,” Marco said.

He inserted the extra-long mouthpiece attached to the breathing tube between his lips.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Josh asked.

With the gunky dairy on one arm, Marco used the clean one to momentarily remove the mouthpiece. “I’ll be back.”

As Marco dove feetfirst into the pool of moldy milk, he felt like a total badass. Sure, Arnold Schwarzenegger probably looked cooler saying the line in his shades rather than a pair of swimming goggles, but he’d still said it in a really cool way nonetheless.

But as soon as he plunged into the bowl of coagulated fungus, his mind was on anything but *Terminator*. His body was instantly enveloped by the mushy cow juice. As the grainy and clumpy bits blinded his goggles, he knew that he’d need to think about where he’d seen the pink.

C’mon, Marco thought. *It should be right behind you. It was at the bottom of the bowl.*

The words echoed in his head as his heart raced even faster.

The bottom *of the bowl . . .*

He didn’t have time for fear. Using his arms to slice through the disgusting porridge, he pulled himself into the wall beside the ladder.

Marco surmised that, based on the positioning, the pink object should be straight down.

Here goes nothing!

As he swam toward the base of the bowl, he took a deep breath. At the same time his fingers connected with an odd-shaped object, he felt a flood of curdled milk invade his mouth. When Marco realized that the breathing tube was designed to be too short to reach the bottom, it was already too late.

He choked on the first sour chunks. The repulsive flavor was the least of his worries. As Marco anxiously tried to pull himself to the top, he understood that he needed to get there quickly, or he might choke to death.

The acidic taste of bacteria overwhelmed his tongue, and vomit exploded out of his nose and splattered the inside of his goggles. He was able to close his eyes, but not before some of the regurgitated moldy milk made its way into them.

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Marco did his best not to panic and prayed that he was nearing the top of the pool. As his free hand came out the top and took hold of the silver ladder, his other hand continued to clench the object he'd retrieved firmly.

When his head broke through the crust atop the bowl, vomit exploded from Marco's mouth. He swam vigorously, hoisting himself out of the pool along with the neon-pink item. Marco steadied himself and ripped off the goggles, unable to stop barfing up the nuggets of fermented dairy he'd swallowed when the breathing tube went under.

Despite being saturated with rotten bile, Marco was grateful that his sock bandage had stayed in place.

"Are you all right?" Josh asked, face crinkled in disgust.

The smell was truly unbearable, but Marco knew time was wasting. He quickly descended the ladder, eyes set on the giant cereal box behind the bowl.

When he reached the massive cereal box, Marco wiped the stinky chunks off the item he'd extracted from the bowl and examined it.

It was a neon-pink letter *Z*.

Eyes darting to the blank area on the big box, he knew exactly where it went. As he popped the pink *Z* into the empty space on the box where the letter had been missing, he noticed that it was the biggest of the missing letters. The remaining four slots—*P*, *R*, *I*, and *E*—were all much smaller. Marco turned back to Kayla, now prepared to answer her question from before.

"The puzzle," he said.

"Okay, so that's one," Josh said. "But where's the other four letters?"

"Four," Marco whispered to himself, realizing they were staring right at the answer. The four small cereal boxes on individual stands made the correlation obvious. "They're in the cereal boxes! Quick, we've gotta open them up!"

Each of the children approached a box, but when they took hold of them, they realized they were no ordinary cereal boxes. While they were painted to look like standard cardboard, they were made of steel and fixed to their respective platforms.

"What the hell?" Josh said.

Marco approached his side, and when he lifted the metal flap at the top of his box, he realized the contents were not ordinary either.

"Gross," Danny said. "It's . . . it's blood!"

“Wh-whose blood is it?” Kayla cried.

“Forget about the blood,” Marco said. “Just reach inside and pull your letters out—we don’t have much time left!”

“But I’m scared,” Kayla said.

“It’s okay,” Steph said. “It’s not much different from that time I got a bloody nose at the Boys & Girls Club, remember? You helped me then, so you can help me now.”

“O-okay,” Kayla said, reluctantly nodding.

Each of the children grimaced as they plunged their arms into their respective boxes. After some feeling around, each returned with a blood-drenched letter. They all raced back up to the big box to join Marco. One by one, they slid their letters in place until they’d completed the word PRIZE. And just as the last letter set in, they heard an unlocking sound.

The front of the giant box started to swing toward them, and Marco realized that the box wasn’t a box at all—it was a door. But inside wasn’t just another metal door like the one they’d come through. The Playground Rules remained true to the riddle.

You were the prize all along, Marco thought.

The boy inside looked a lot like the boy on the front of the *Playground Puffs* cereal boxes. Except his hair was now burned so badly that only patches of blond remained, and his face was melted to look like a misshapen meatball. His look of horror remained steadily in place, as he sat slumped on the floor with a strange black vest strapped to his chest.

The charred flesh that covered most of his body undoubtedly made existence miserable for him. The previously liquefied, marbled skin had caused some of his fingers on one hand to fuse together. Just studying his injuries was painful for Marco. The mere fact that the boy was breathing was astonishing.

The child looked like an absolute monster.

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A NEW TOY

Fuchs grinned as he lost himself in the music. He'd not explored much American pop culture—he was normally thinking up ways to kill Americans instead. But he was grateful that he'd found the Walkman in the little girl's backpack. He simply couldn't go an hour without listening to the cassette—particularly a song toward the end of Side A: "Hungry Eyes."

While he loved the music, it wasn't merely just that. There was something else. In a strange way, it struck a chord with him. So much of his life had been spent expelling childhood rage. Like many great scientists, he'd been selfish. As much as he hungered for a woman's love, his racing mind had never allowed it.

He was dedicated to death.

Still, as sad as his dry love life made him, the melancholic feeling the song gave him was like a drug. He'd rewound it over and over and allowed the captivating tune to worm its way into his head until it felt like he was constantly mimicking the catchy keyboard tempo in everything he did. He listened to the song while he worked, and he listened while he played. The last several days were dominated by the track.

As Fuchs half-danced in his chair, bopping his shoulders side to side, Geraldine tapped him. He lifted one of his headphones so he could hear her.

"What are you listening to?" she asked.

"Zhe *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack," Fuchs said proudly. As uncultured as he was, that moment felt like the perfect time to show off his newly acquired knowledge and taste. "I fancy it."

She raised an eyebrow, surprised by his response.

But before she had a chance to comment, the black monitor suddenly illuminated and the door onscreen opened. They once again had a visual of the children. And with Matthew's unmistakable melted hand in frame, Fuchs watched as Geraldine still struggled to figure it out. Surging with excitement, Fuchs ripped the headphones off.

"Zhe vest zhe boy is wearing works in three ways," Fuchs explained, pointing to the monitor. "It has a camera zhat will offer you a window into zhe boy's perspective."

He lifted a radio transmitter. There was a blue button on one side and a red one on the other.

"Zhe blue button will transmit to a small earpiece—so only zhe boy can hear you. Zhe red one will project through a speaker in his vest, allowing you to speak directly with zhe entire group."

As Fuchs explained the technology, he impressed himself with his own design. Working as a Nazi scientist, he was well aware of suppressed knowledge and machinery. Most tech that was released to the public was anywhere from fifteen to twenty years behind the true cutting-edge.

Still, the wireless video relay was not an easy nut to crack, but his IQ had helped guide him—it was a task responsible for many sleepless nights. Fuchs knew he needed to stay on Geraldine's good side if he wanted to continue with his life of luxury.

He was relieved to see his efforts were not going unnoticed. Each reveal seemed to make her confidence in him grow. Furthermore, Fuchs himself was excited. As he looked at the faces of the terrified and confused children, he smiled.

Zhey are not innocent, Fuchs thought. *No one is innocent. While zhey are not exactly like zhe ones who stripped me, zhey are not much different. Zhey stripped me of my pride—of my humanity . . . and for zhat, everyone will feel zhe most wicked fear. Zhey created zhis monster. And now, zhey will all pay dearly for it.*

"I don't understand," Geraldine said. "What boy?"

Fuchs grinned. "Zhe boy from zhe swings."

She looked flabbergasted by the revelation. "But I . . . I thought he was dead. Melted to a puddle."

"Almost," Fuchs said, gesturing with his head at Rock. "But he convinced me to recycle zhe boy. It took us many months of incredible

effort, but not only has he been salvaged, we discovered zhat zhe boy has a very *specific* obsession."

Geraldine grinned, taking in the new set of options that she'd been gifted. It was easy for Fuchs to see that she couldn't wait to hear more.

"Pray tell," she said.

"For many months zhe boy babbled about his family." Fuchs smirked, recalling the child's agony. "He cried and cried, begging zhat we reunite him with his parents—begging zhat we allow zhem to see him. We told zhis child many times zhat if he should want to see his family reunited, zhen when zhe time comes he should listen very carefully to zhe commands he's given."

"My word," Geraldine said, taking hold of the radio. She seemed to feel the new power associated with it.

"I imagine it will be much fun for you," Fuchs said, looking at the children on the screen. "Zhink of him as a toy soldier . . . and zhink of yourself as a commander. Use him at your will, meddle as you please. Or don't, and instead enjoy his perspective. Zhe choice is yours."

"My, my," Geraldine said, listening to the audio of the children bleed through the speaker. "I don't know how to thank you for this." She turned to Rock. "And thank you too, Rock. You've been proving more useful as of late. Salvaging the boy was a brilliant idea. It completely changes the dynamic . . . having one on the inside."

Rock nodded along with Fuchs.

"And the best part is the other children don't even know," Geraldine said, continuing to study the group. "My, they all seem so frightened."

"Wouldn't you be?" Rock asked.

She looked back at him. "I suppose I would."

"Any questions, my lady?" Fuchs asked.

"Just one." Geraldine scratched the side of her face. "What's our boy's name?"

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HOOPS AND ROPES

“M-M-Matthew,” the boy stammered.

Each of the children quickly introduced themselves to the new kid. While the boy looked monstrous, Steph could tell that he was just hurt. She did her best to act normal and keep her sister calm.

“Okay, Matthew,” Marco said. “How did you get hurt?”

“We don’t have time for that,” Danny said. “How—how do we get out of here? Is there a way out?”

“Ahhhhhh!” Matthew let out a bloodcurdling shriek. “I-I don’t know! Where am I? W-what’s happening?!”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Josh said. “Do you remember how you—”

“I’m not sure if we should waste any more time asking him questions,” Steph interrupted. “He doesn’t seem ready for that anyway . . .”

Just looking at Matthew’s ghastly appearance made her stomach rumble. But still, she tried to keep up her normal act. Steph couldn’t remember another time that just looking at a person had ever made her feel physically ill.

Except for Mom and Dad, Steph thought.

A flicker of her father’s knuckles connecting with her mother’s mouth flashed in Steph’s head.

Every time they became violent with each other, she felt that same nasty churning in her stomach. But at least she was used to their fights. While the psychological aspects were deeply scarring, her parents had never left any physical scars on her or Kayla—only on each other.

The image of her mother’s fat, bleeding lip wouldn’t leave her mind. Steph tried her best to move on and think about the more pressing issues.

While being trapped in the Playground against her will presented a similar angst to the type Steph felt back home, the danger was much different. The way she had to look after Kayla now had completely changed. And she had to focus on protecting her sister’s life while at the same time fighting for her own.

“Yeah, and we don’t know how far away Mildred is,” Josh said. “You’re right. Maybe we should just keep moving.”

“What’s that—” Marco’s question was cut short by a vomit spell. The fermented milk still clung to his pants and body. He held the shirt at his side, trying not to soil it.

Matthew looked at him and pointed at the three buckets. “Maybe that can . . . help.”

Steph investigated the buckets: one was filled with water, one with cereal puffs, and one with bodily waste.

“Hey, this one is just water,” she said.

“Just stand up straight,” Josh said, taking hold of the bucket and turning it upside down.

“Guys, we really need to go,” Danny persisted. “We can’t forget—that thing is waiting.”

As the water doused Marco, a fair amount of the curdled milk washed off him. He slipped on his shirt. There were still little bits and globs stuck to his hair, skin, and clothes, but now it at least seemed bearable. Steph hoped that Marco wouldn’t slow them down with more vomit spells.

“What’s that vest he’s wearing?” Marco was finally able to ask, pointing at what looked like speaker holes in Matthew’s chest. “Seems kind of weird.” Marco tapped what looked to be a lens rooted beside the alleged audio outlets.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

The sound of a clock expiring rang out, coinciding with the metal door on the other end of the room unsealing. Immediately thereafter a pair of thunderous footsteps methodically drew closer.

“I told you!” Danny cried.

“Crap,” Steph said. “We better go now.”

Marco and Danny quickly helped Matthew to his feet while Josh took hold of the metal door on their side of the room and yanked it open.

“Quick, everybody inside!” Josh yelled.

Once everyone made their way through, Josh and Marco pushed the door shut. But as soon as they heard it seal, the hands of the clockface fixed to its back started to move.

“Here we go again,” Josh said.

Steph squeezed Kayla’s hand, watching as Marco approached the Playground Rules sign.

Matthew suddenly started screeching, letting out little sporadic yelps. Steph looked at his disfigured flesh. It was obvious the boy had felt what it was like to melt. He resembled a human hotdog left on the grill too long. She wondered if the intermittent cries he continued to unleash were the result of his body still recalling the phantom pain from when it had been roasted by intense flames.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Danny said, approaching Matthew and hesitantly placing a hand on his shoulder.

Matthew twitched when contact was made but seemed to appreciate the show of affection. Steph imagined it was the most affection he’d gotten in some time.

“In case you don’t know . . . something is chasing us—something that wants to hurt us really bad,” Danny continued. “We want to help you, but the only way to help is to keep going. Do you trust us?”

Matthew twitched, wiping the drool from his mouth before finally nodding in agreement.

“S-sorry,” Matthew said. “Sometimes I c-c-can’t help it.”

“It’s okay,” Josh said. “But we need to go.”

“Right.” Marco turned his attention back to the Playground Rules sign. “I guess I should read this first one.”

“Part one?” Kayla said.

Steph looked at the sign and noticed what her sister was calling out. The sign clearly said *Part 1* at the top. “That’s weird . . . the last sign wasn’t like this.”

Marco shrugged. “Maybe this room is bigger?”

“Can we just read the rules?” Danny asked impatiently. “If it is bigger then we really need to move our butts.”

Steph had never seen Danny so bossy and on edge. It was only fair, considering some of the things they’d just witnessed. She hoped they could go back to normal again.

“Okay,” Marco said. “ ‘Playground Rules: Ropes will swing, and fans will blow. Choose only *one* child to defeat the flow.’ ”

“One person . . .” Danny said. “How do we figure out who’s gonna go? Rock, paper, scissors?”

“Hold your horses,” Steph said. “We don’t even know what we’re going up against right now.” She turned and looked down the dark hallway. Unlike the last one, this hallway appeared to be made completely out of metal. The steel reminded her of the locker room at the Boys & Girls Club.

What would Coach Cal do? Steph wondered.

He was one of the few adults in her life who cared enough to offer her guidance. She thought back to their last interaction outside the Boys & Girls Club.

Play to your strengths. Right, Steph? he’d said.

She took a deep breath, knowing that now they weren’t just a bunch of kids on their own. Maybe it seemed that way to the rest of the group, but it was up to Steph to enlighten them. They had guidance and wisdom—Coach Cal was with them.

“Let’s check it out first,” she said. “Then, I say we vote on who goes based on our strengths . . . Let’s play to our strengths!”

Everyone stayed quiet, yet she saw from their expressions that they were all in agreement.

“Okay,” Josh said. “We’d better get going.”

The kids filed down the hallway, and as they drew closer to the corner, Steph heard a strange gurgling noise. When the next corridor came into view, the source of the sound was revealed.

On the left side of the hallway was a steel wall littered with rusty spikes of all sizes, and on the opposite wall were six huge hula hoops with industrial-grade fan blades at the center. There were marked off sections between the spikes and hoops showing where each fan started and the next began. The propellers inside the vibrant-colored hoops remained still; the only movement in the room to be found was in one of the sections between the spikes and hoops.

Above a crimson-soaked trapdoor dangled Jazmine. Her hip socket remained gushing while her broken torso caused her to continue to gag and spit up blood. Unable to stand, she was suspended by a colorful jump rope that hung from a hook in the ceiling. The destroyed girl’s body occupied the lone path that led to the other side of the room.

Several of the children started crying when they saw her, while the others remained speechless. Fighting through the terror, Steph desperately tried to figure out what was going on.

The fans suddenly started to spin. At first the revolutions of each fan were all the same, each creating a stiff breeze. But without warning, the fan closest to them shifted into a much higher gear. The sound of power surging to propel the blades faster was loud and pronounced, like the pluck of a bass guitar.

Steph jumped, not expecting the intensity of the vibration to rattle the steel corridor. After the initial ramp-up, the fan right beside Jazmine sped up even more, expelling winds that were on par with the power of a hurricane. Steph noticed Kayla flinch in angst, just as the surge shifted to the fan directly in front of Jazmine.

Against the power of the gust, the poor girl’s broken body was nothing more than a leaf in the wind. The jump rope that Jazmine hung from swung full force into the wall, pushing her torso against the unforgiving spikes like cardboard in a tornado. Several rusty points ripped through her tiny frame as easily as a hole puncher through paper.

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One spike drove through the back of her cranium and exited through the other side, breaking her cheekbone and pushing muscle and meat through her face. Several other spikes stabbed deep into her back and blasted through her chest and remaining thigh. As the blood squirted from her wounds, the fan blew it back in her face. Jazmine looked like a human voodoo doll that had gone to Hell.

More panic, crying, and screaming ensued. It was pure chaos as the velocity of the fans continued to change at random, constantly switching on and off.

"She's dead again!" Danny shrieked. "She's dead again!"

"I just want Mom and Dad," Kayla wailed.

Matthew's screams were so high-pitched that it felt like they were scraping against Steph's eardrum.

"Everybody shut up for a minute!" Josh yelled. "I'm not trying to scream, but we—we can't all keep going crazy. We don't have the time!"

Their volume came down. Even Matthew, who had sounded like a firetruck siren, managed to stop.

As Josh tried to get the group back on the same page, Steph realized that she should be doing the same. In that moment, she didn't see him as the dirty, annoying kid from the Boys & Girls Club. She didn't see him as a mean and gross boy she'd rather die than date. She saw him as a brave leader—one who had already put the lives of others in front of his own.

"Josh is right," Steph said, looking at Kayla, who continued to quietly sob. "If we don't want to end up like Jazmine, then we need to figure out how to get past these fans. We've gotta play to our strengths."

As the words left Steph's lips, she saw Kayla's expression change dramatically.

"Yeah, but . . . how do we figure that out?" Marco asked, clearly still rattled by the extreme violence. He pointed at the spikes and fan blades. "I mean, I-I get what you're saying, but who's even ever seen anything like this stuff before?"

Steph didn't have an answer. No one did.

Marco squinted and gazed down the long steel pathway. "Are those jump ropes?"

"What do you mean?" Steph asked.

"I think he's right," Danny said. "Look all the way down, past the fans."

They’d been so distracted by the violent assault on Jazmine that they’d only noticed the spike wall and hula hoop fans. But something equally—if not more—concerning lay beyond.

At the far end of the corridor the handles of two jump ropes were connected to each wall. A lever system kept both ropes moving up and down at a rapid rate. And while they appeared to move like any normal ropes would during a double-Dutch playground session, there was something distinct about them that was noticeable even from a distance.

“Are they . . . made out of metal?” Marco asked.

“ ‘Ropes will swing, and fans will blow,’ ” Danny said, repeating the Playground Rule. “ ‘Choose only *one* child to defeat the flow’ . . .”

“Why j-j-just one?” Matthew asked.

Steph looked at the boy covered in burns. He hadn’t said much so far, but he’d asked a good question.

“Who cares?” Danny said.

Marco pointed past the steel, swinging ropes. “There . . .”

“What is it?” Josh asked.

“There’s a big red button at the end. It must do something. It might be the key out of here.”

“Yeah, but who’s gonna go?” The nervousness in Danny’s voice amplified as he started to sob again. “I-I don’t think I can do it, guys.”

“It’s not about who can do it,” Steph said. “It’s about who has the best chance to. We’ve got to play to our—”

“Steph, look!” Kayla yelled, causing everyone to be quiet.

Her sister held her little hand up, showing that her fingers were going in a continuous motion. The sound of the hula hoop fans surging in a specific pattern corresponded directly with her thumb as it touched her index, then middle, and finally her ring finger.

“How’s she doing that?” Marco asked with astonishment.

Steph tried to put it together in her own head but remained confused.

“It’s ‘Hungry Eyes,’ ” Kayla said.

As her fingers continued on for several seconds, matching the fans’ rhythm to a tee, the correlation was undeniable.

“It’s just like Coach Cal said,” Kayla whispered. “I can do it, Steph. I know I can.”

Tears started to well in Steph’s eyes. The thought of allowing her little sister to venture out into imminent danger scared her to death. She searched

for a way—any way—to convince her otherwise.

"No, you—you can't . . ." Steph said.

"It sounds like she knows how to though—"

"Shut the hell up, Danny!" Steph yelled. "This is between me and my sister!"

Danny stomped in frustration. "It's between all of us!"

"Hey, just let them talk," Josh said firmly.

"I'd let you do it, but there's those ropes at the end," Steph said, quickly conjuring up a reason to justify her position. "That's too much."

Kayla half-smiled. "I know you want to keep me safe—you always do. But we both know that I'm about as good at jump rope as anyone here. And I'm smaller. It'll be easier for me than you or even Danny." Her fingers continued on pace with the rhythm of the fans. "I'm not scared, Steph. I have to do it. I'm the only one who can."

The tears were now pouring as Steph slapped her hand against her mouth. She couldn't believe how brave her little sister was—even braver than her.

She's been through so much.

Part of Steph wondered if being around violence at home had somehow given Kayla a false sense of confidence. But whether that was true or not, she knew her sister was right.

"Okay," Steph whispered. "I won't stop you."

Kayla gave her sister a hug and squeezed her tight.

"Everything will be okay," Kayla said.

The crying was now uncontrollable as Steph realized their roles had been reversed. She was almost always looking out for little Kayla, like a big sister should. Protecting her from the turbulence that shook their family and whatever else she needed to be shielded from. But at that moment, Kayla was the one consoling her.

"I love you," Steph said. "Be careful . . ."

"I love you too," Kayla said.

Steph watched as her little sister got ready to do her part. She'd never seen her look so serious. While she could tell Kayla was frightened, she seemed nowhere near as frightened as Steph. Kayla ripped the scrunchie from around her wrist and put her hair up in a ponytail as the other kids wished her luck and thanked her for having the guts to face the challenge.

Hand by her side, Kayla used her tic to match the tempo of the fans as they switched on and off. After carefully logging their exact pattern to memory, she took a deep breath. As the blades in front of Kayla deactivated, she rushed onto the section directly in front of the first fan.

Five more to go . . .

Steph crossed her fingers.

When the next fan switched off, Kayla immediately moved forward again. She'd made it just one section away from Jazmine, and Steph started to feel like her sister was making good progress.

Four more to go . . .

This time, as Kayla waited for another fan farther away to disable itself, the section directly in front of her was hit with a massive blast of wind that whistled in front of her face. She eyed the trapdoor on the next space and shook her head. There wasn't a chance she'd try and escape while leaving the other behind. Once the burst subsided, Kayla made a break for it. She ran like she knew she might be home free. But as she stepped forward, avoiding the trapdoor, another obstacle manifested: Jazmine's blood-drenched arm lifted and grabbed hold of Kayla's shirt.

"H-h-help me-e-e," Jazmine groaned with barely any vigor left inside her.

"No!" Steph screamed. "Let her go!"

Kayla shrieked, stumbling forward from Jazmine's slippery grip. Losing her balance, she fell onto the section in front of her. Steph noticed that she seemed to have completely lost track of her finger movements that had been mimicking the tempo.

"Run, Kayla!" Josh yelled. "Ruuuuuuuuunnnn!"

Something inside Steph pushed her hand toward Josh's. She grabbed hold of it and squeezed like hell. A sliver of comfort rose inside her when Josh gave her a tender squeeze back. It helped stop her from totally freaking out.

"Get up!" Marco said. "Quick!"

"Go, Kayla, go," Danny whispered to himself.

Kayla seemed to respond to their words of encouragement. She promptly picked herself up off the ground and powered forward. But as she reached the final space, she hesitated. Steph could see that when Kayla jumped off the space, she'd be jumping directly into the double-Dutch steel

rope frenzy. But as the sound of the fan on Kayla's section activating rang out, Steph knew it was time for her sister to take her best shot.

"Please, God, please, God," Steph cried, squeezing Josh's hand even harder.

When the fan activated, Kayla left her feet and screamed, at the same time. And like angels had guided her forward, she seamlessly slipped into the whirlwind of ropes. Kayla had successfully evaded the steel wires, and her feet began to jump the repeated revolutions. The sound of the razor-sharp metal smacking against the wooden ground that was only on that particular space made for intimidating audio.

Every second was like torture to Steph, so when her sister decided to try and exit the double-Dutch almost as quickly as she'd entered, she was both horrified and relieved. As Kayla bailed and leapt toward the safe zone, Steph held her breath. It was like time froze. Her sister's tiny body slid sideways, floating through the air, fueled by her momentum and will to live and be great. Steph just hoped she'd be granted that chance.

Her body cleared the steel ropes, but her hair didn't. When one of the wires came down, the end of her ponytail was still in the strike zone. As the fortified jump rope connected with part of Kayla's ponytail, two things became clear: the ropes were razor sharp *and* electrified. The super-charged steel sliced through the hair, causing a plethora of sparks to explode from Kayla's head.

"Kayla!" Steph yelled.

The kids all looked on in pure horror as her body went limp and fell to the ground.

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THE WEIGHT OF GUILT

“Clever girl,” Fuchs said, clearly impressed by the young girl’s performance and grit.

Rock remained dejected and quiet, drawing deeper and deeper into himself. When Fuchs had given him the order to retrieve the girl injured by Mildred, he had been struck with dread. Outside of what happened to the boy on the swings, he’d never seen anyone injured so horrifically and still live. The task of carrying her bleeding body through the underground tunnel and up the trapdoor was a horrible weight that remained with him.

But he was used to the weight.

As he picked at the half-dried blood on his fingers, Rock recalled the weight on his shoulders. He’d been feeling it since he could remember—since he was a confused child discarded at the orphanage. His entire time there was spent in silence and solitude. Even in a pool of other children who had been rejected by their own blood, he felt like the outsider. For the entire duration of his time at the dreary establishment, Rock had been friendless, and the adults hadn’t cared enough to take an interest in him. He felt worthless. The isolation caused him to think more about the unanswerable questions he’d been saddled with.

They haunted him.

Why did they leave me behind? he’d thought. *Why does no one care? What’s wrong with me?*

His upper body involuntarily flexed as he recalled the pain and depression. Those feelings were the reason his body looked the way it did—

why his muscles looked chiseled out of stone and why his veins throbbed like furious snakes.

He'd started lifting objects at first because he didn't have access to a gym. Whether it was bags of water or paint cans, he lifted. In his mind he imagined that he was lifting the burden off his soul—peeling the trauma away, rep by rep.

Those weights were always there for you, Rock thought. *They were about the only goddamn thing that ever was.*

But no matter how much his muscles bulged, no matter how heavy he lifted, they remained. The horrors of his past. The things he'd been told by Geraldine as far back as he could remember. It all remained.

But now there was something else—a guilt burning inside for the mangled girl and the roasted boy.

You didn't hurt 'em, Rock thought. *And you didn't kill 'em. But you might as well have . . .*

"That was quite impressive," Geraldine said.

"Yes, but zhey aren't done with zhis room yet," Fuchs said, tapping the radio. "And remember, zhey are only as impressive as you want zhem to be."

Whenever Rock listened to Fuchs, he was almost mesmerized by the man's cutthroat focus. His attention to horrific detail disgusted Rock as much as it impressed him. After helping him construct the prototype, he'd seen his methods up close. The idea that he'd designed a single tunnel system that ran through the entire prototype so Mildred could have a shortcut to any room was frightening.

Rock wasn't like them. He didn't take pleasure in the children being hurt. In fact, he was a grown-up version of what they were both getting their jollies from. Still, at the same time, Geraldine was all he knew. He rested his hand over his chest, feeling the branded tattoo of ownership that she'd seared into his flesh so many years ago.

He was a long way from courage. He was an even longer way from being able to confidently live with even the most basic version of independence. He wouldn't even know what to do with himself.

They're all I know . . .

Geraldine picked up the radio and pressed the blue button. "Matthew, you worthless, microwaved marshmallow, if you ever want to see your pathetic parents again, you'll hold the camera steady!" She switched off the

radio and looked at Fuchs. “Who’d have thought that I’d actually enjoy being patient?”

“Not I,” Fuchs said.

“It’ll only make the fruits of my labor that much juicier.”

Fuchs grinned, watching her set the radio down. “Good zhings come to zhose who wait.”

“They have a long way to go,” Geraldine continued. “I’ll be interested to see if the little one’s brain is fried. I’d be surprised if her legs still work, let alone her heart or brain.” She glared back at Rock. “At minimum, she’s probably a retard now.”

Fuchs shrugged. “She is a tough cookie. Zhe rope only struck her hair. I suppose anyzhing is possible.”

Geraldine returned her attention to the screen. The way they casually discussed the girl potentially dying infuriated Rock. But rage was of little use to a man who was a slave to his own shattered confidence.

This is all I know . . .

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SKIP-IT

Danny looked on in terror as all the kids yelled in Kayla's direction, trying to see if she was all right. Everyone except for the boy beside him.

The partially melted custom yo-yo had his name on the side of it. When it finished spinning and stopped in his hand, Danny could see the letters were distorted—ironically similar to the manner in which his body was disfigured. It was like the boy used the yo-yo as a calming mechanism.

"Yo-yo, yo-yo," Matthew mumbled. "Never got to show Dad my new one . . . He hates Bill anyway though . . ."

"Kayla!" Steph yelled.

Marco pointed. "I-I think she's moving!"

The smoke from the burnt hair rose as Kayla finally sat up. "I'm . . . I think I'm okay."

"Thank God!" Steph said.

Danny noticed Steph glance down at her hand and slowly pull it away from Josh.

"Glad she's okay," Josh said.

Steph's emotions were clearly still running high. She shook her head. "I need to see her."

As Kayla stood up, Marco called out, "Quick, press the red button!"

She staggered toward it, finally getting her bearings and smacking the huge button with her palm. Immediately, all the fans switched off and the steel jump rope cables slowed to a halt.

"She did it . . ." Marco said. "Holy crap, she did it!"

They all cheered and raced forward.

Despite the danger being deactivated, Danny still wasn't fully at ease. He wanted to get out of the room as soon as possible. Even when he passed Jazmine's body, he had flashbacks of her grabbing hold of Kayla. As he drew closer to her, in the back of his mind he wondered if she might truly come back from the dead. While he wanted to ignore the grisly corpse and press on, he knew he couldn't.

As he slowed in front of Jazmine's dead, gawking eyes, Danny reached into his pocket. He pulled out the plastic tube that contained his exclusive *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* pog set. For a moment, he thought about how Teddy and Jazmine wanted to jump him and had even threatened him over the toys. His bottom lip trembled as he stuck them into Jazmine's pants pocket.

"They're for you and . . . Teddy," Danny whispered.

Danny's eyes fixated on the gore and blood that caked the spike pushing through Jazmine's face. Somehow their petty differences seemed so insignificant now. He knew that if they ever found a way out of the Playground, life—and everything in it he'd believed to be important—would be *much* different. He might look at those he wasn't fond of with optimistic eyes in hopes that they might one day do the same for him. Because, if there was one thing the hell that stared back at Danny told him, it was that none of their squabbles mattered.

Matthew stumbled forward, finally slipping his yo-yo back into his pocket and checking the trapdoor. He sighed when the lock stopped it from opening. As Danny watched Matthew he got a strange feeling. While he couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was, there was something about the boy that didn't sit well with him.

Maybe it's just because he's the only one I've never met before, Danny thought.

Steph closed in on her little sister and gave her the biggest hug of her life.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Steph whispered.

Kayla was grinning from ear to ear. "I told you I could do it."

"You did." Steph laughed. "It was close, but this is one time I'm glad you were right."

"I don't mean to be a downer," Josh said, "but that clock's still ticking."

Marco interrupted, calling them from around the corner. "Hey, guys! I found the rest of the Playground Rules."

Everyone promptly made their way around the bend. Danny saw the door to advance to the next room was at the end of the small hallway before them. Attached to the walls on each side of it were a pair of soccer goals, and in front of the goals were circles that contained a pair of Skip-Its.

Dread filled Danny as he started to grasp the situation. He was quite familiar with the Skip-It toy. He had one at home and used it frequently. The hoop end of the device went around one ankle, while the other end was connected to a ball by a long piece of plastic. The person using it swung the ball in a circular motion, and each time the ball's momentum brought it back around, their free leg would need to hop over it for the counter to register a successful skip.

No! Danny thought. *Steph and I have both played this together many times at my house!*

The idea of being the one who had to play terrified him. He wasn't ready to be brave. Especially after seeing what Kayla had just gone through.

She almost freaking died . . .

Marco cleared his throat. " 'Skip-It ten times and feel the cut. Then fling it into the goal or get blown up' . . ."

Steph's eyes widened as she moved in to inspect the Skip-Its. The reaction drew Danny's attention.

"Oh, no . . ." Steph said.

He immediately understood the danger in the riddle. The inside of the hoop that the person using it would put around their ankle was essentially a giant circular razor. If he were to use it, the momentum and weight of the ball would undoubtedly carve up his ankle and calf. The digital box on the ball was lit up with red light next to the font that read ARMED. He looked up at one of the goals, where there was a green light and letters that read DISARM.

Danny could only assume that meant the Skip-It could explode any second, and would, unless the ten revolutions were completed and it was flung into the goal in time.

Steph locked eyes with him. She had a look on her face like she was trying to apologize. "You know this has to be you and me, right?"

"What?" Danny squealed. "Are you crazy?! This thing is gonna cut us or—or blow us up!"

She looked at the rest of the group. "Anyone else ever use one of these things?"

The other boys looked at them like they were crazy.

“That’s for girls,” Josh said.

Danny shook his head, wishing he hadn’t fallen in love with the super-fun toy. He cursed himself for not having given up gymnastics or anything girly. He would’ve gladly done so if he could’ve seen this moment inside the wicked Playground.

Kayla raised her hand.

“I know you’ve used it before,” Steph said. “But not as much as me and Danny. Plus, you need a break.”

A worried look overtook Kayla’s face as she lowered her hand. It was like she’d suddenly realized that it was her turn to worry now.

“Why can’t Matthew do it?” Danny asked. “He hasn’t done anything yet.”

“He’s messed up, okay?” Steph said. “We’re running out of time! If there’s anyone who this makes sense for, it’s you. If we’re gonna make it out of here, everyone’s gotta play to their strengths, and everyone’s gotta pull their own weight.”

“Fine!” Danny said. “But what about our legs? Can we at least figure out a way to protect ourselves?”

“You can use our shirts,” Josh said, slapping Marco on the back and quickly removing his.

He bent down and tied his T-shirt around Steph’s ankle and lower shin, trying his best to keep her protected.

“Thanks,” she said.

Marco just stood there looking self-conscious.

“Well?” Josh said. “Hurry up!”

When Marco removed his shirt, it was clear that he was much scrawnier than Josh. But he tied his shirt around Danny’s ankle, committed to helping out with the cause.

Danny groaned as the vile smell of curdled milk wafted up his nostrils. He frowned as a few of the moist, moldy chunks touched his skin, clinging to it like giant boogers.

“Of course I’m the one who gets the small and *extra* stinky shirt,” Danny whined.

“You good?” Steph asked, wiping the sweat off her brow.

For a second it sounded like she was asking herself rather than him. The preparation made Danny feel slightly better. It also felt good to know that

she was a little nervous too—even if she really didn't show it much.

"Wait," Kayla said. "What about—"

"We can't wait any longer," Steph interrupted. "We've already wasted enough time. You guys should step back around the corner. Better safe than sorry . . ."

The kids listened, and Danny and Steph each squatted down, carefully sliding their respective razor hoops around each of their ankles. They looked each other in the eyes, nodding in agreement.

"You ready?" Danny asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be . . ."

They each turned and faced their respective goals.

"On three, let's count them out, okay?" Steph asked.

"Okay."

Danny's heart felt like a skipping record repeating on a bass line as he awaited her command. He tried to focus.

You can do this . . .

Steph exhaled.

"One . . . two . . . three!"

Danny started gingerly slinging the Skip-It around his leg, but when he heard Steph log her first skip before him, he quickened his pace. As the razor hoop cut into the shirt cloth, he winced but soldiered on. With each rotation, he watched the steel burrow deeper through the protective layer. But he continued to press on, round after round.

"Six!" they both yelled.

Almost there, Danny thought. *Just a—*

His thought was interrupted by his own scream. As he saw the blood staining the razor hoop and Marco's T-shirt, he tried not to faint. He knew if he did, that might very well be the end for both of them. He pushed through several more revolutions.

"Nine!" they screamed.

Danny knew it was just one more cycle. As he judged the momentum of the Skip-It on the last spin, he looked up at the goal and sized up his shot.

Here goes nothing!

"Ten!" they both cried.

When Danny flung the Skip-It, he could see the red light blur through the air. It felt like the world around him had slowed. There was never a

question—the device flew right into the net. And as the ball broke the sensor on the goal, the red light instantly transitioned to green.

In the same instant, Danny's leg gave way. He slipped in the puddle of his own blood, feeling the muscles and tendons in his ankle rip. But when he landed on the ground and spun to the side, he realized that he had far bigger problems than his gruesome injury.

Steph's shot sailed wide-left.

"Run!" she yelled, scrambling in his direction.

But as her feet found Danny's blood, she slipped and joined him on the floor. When the device started to beep like crazy, Danny figured they were goners, but Josh came barreling around the corner like he had a death wish.

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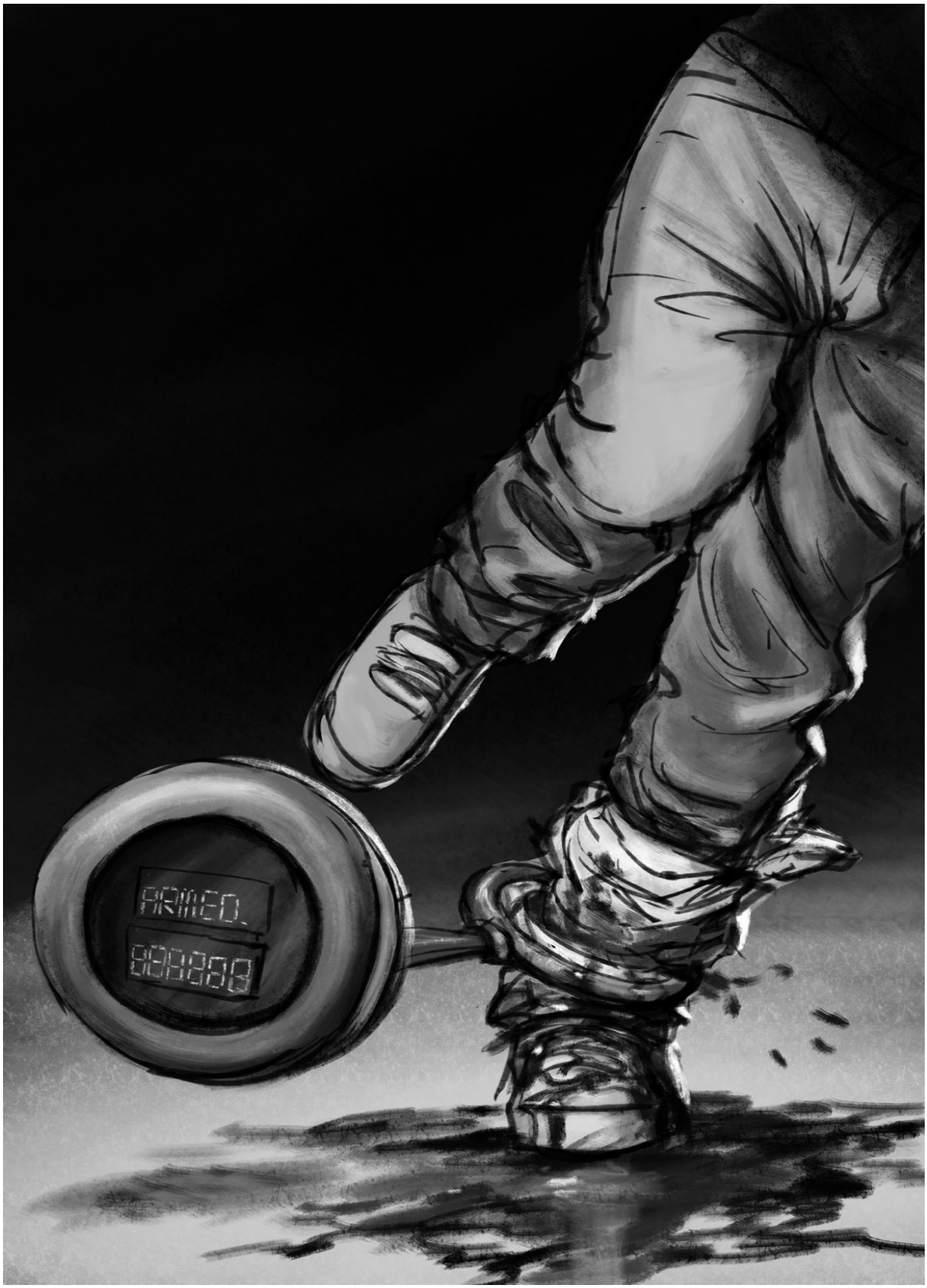
ARMED
88:88:88

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“I gotcha!” Josh said.

As the big boy grabbed each of their wrists, he reversed his direction. Like a bull staring at red, he charged, dragging both Steph and Danny back around the corner as the device erupted. The shrapnel shot in every direction, but Josh got them around the corner in time. The metal walls and ceiling of the corridor kept the blast contained.

When Josh collapsed on the ground, Danny thought he’d been hit. But the fall was an attempt to avoid getting nicked. The three of them sat on the ground while the others looked on in shock.

After Josh felt around and finished checking his body for wounds, Steph breathed a sigh of relief. “Holy shit, we’re all right.” Then she saw Danny. “Um, except for Danny’s leg . . .”

Josh’s eyes widened as blood oozed out of the gaping red rings on Danny’s leg. “That looks *really* fucked-up.”

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THE WORM IN YOUR EAR

“Now I’m getting a little annoyed,” Geraldine said. “If I’m being honest, I would’ve preferred the little queer boy not be with us anymore. How did he—and especially that young girl—manage to get past all that?”

Rock watched as Fuchs shrugged and then lifted the Walkman off the counter. The old man slipped it into his jacket almost discreetly. “Zhat is a very good question . . .”

She snatched the radio transmitter. “Blue for the boy, red for the rest, correct?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Just making sure.” Geraldine pressed the blue button. “Listen to me, you worthless little piece of fucking garbage.”

There’s that word again, Rock thought. *Worthless.*

It was a word she’d used often to describe him. It was a word that, over time, he’d grown to believe he embodied. It made his stomach drop and feel sick each time she said it—even if it wasn’t directed at him.

All she does is tear people down.

Rock thought back to when he’d nursed the boy back to health. He was the one who’d changed his bandages and listened to him incessantly cry and babble. He’d fed him, bathed him, and wiped his ass.

Despite the nature of those chores, they were things Rock was grateful to have been given the opportunity to do.

The boy would’ve been done for otherwise—euthanized by that madman. He glared at Fuchs.

That was the only decent thing he'd ever seen Fuchs do during his tenure at The Borden Estate. But it wasn't truly even an act of kindness; it was an agreement for suspended torture and certain death.

Maybe he'll make it somehow . . .

"Listen up, little Matthew," Geraldine said. "You're going to need to make something happen for us soon. When the moment arrives for you to strike, I'll let you know."

"Remind him of zhe reward," Fuchs suggested. "It will ensure he is motivated."

Rock remembered the boy talking about his parents without fail. Arms chained to the hospital bed, eye mask and bandages blacking out his sight, he just cried for months. He cried and talked about a day in the future when he and his mother and father would all be together again.

Just like old times, Rock recalled him saying.

He'd said it so many damn times that it became the obvious carrot to dangle in front of the boy. In a castle whose foundation had been built on manipulation, Fuchs identified the opportunity immediately. They weren't going to ever let Matthew forget about it.

Geraldine grinned excitedly. "Remember, do as we say, and I *promise*, by the end of all this, you'll be back by your parents' side."

She promised. But what are her promises really worth?

Rock looked at the screen, wishing he could see Matthew. While his ghastly appearance would surely make Rock feel guilty again, something about not seeing the boy worried him.

"Turn left if you understand, dummy," Geraldine said.

The camera jolted to the left, continuing to spin.

"Okay, stop." Geraldine huffed, released the blue button, and set the radio back on the hook. "Boy, he's not very bright."

On the screen, Rock saw that Josh had ripped off one of the long aluminum blades from one of the fans. He positioned it beside Danny's leg, using it as a splint.

"I'm gonna tie it to you now, okay?" Josh asked.

"O-okay," Danny said.

"See?" Geraldine pointed at Josh. "That one *looks* like a fool, but shockingly, he's actually pretty intelligent."

"Yes," Fuchs agreed. "Smarter zhen we zhought . . ."

Geraldine slammed her fist on the counter. “It’s time! It’s time! I’m tired of waiting!”

Fuchs tried his best to console her. “My lady, have no fear, all is well.”

“Why would you say a thing like that?” Geraldine raised an eyebrow.

“Because”—a grin that repulsed Rock slowly spread across Fuchs’ face—“look who’s returned.”

At the far end of the hallway, Mildred’s menacing scowl hovered in a shroud of darkness. The children were all too preoccupied by the bloodshed to notice.

“Mother . . .” Geraldine whispered.

“Zhe explosions must have distracted zhem from zhe door opening,” Fuchs said.

He pointed down at a switch that was fixed to the control board. There was a yellow dial that covered a range of zero to ten and had the word VIOLENCE labeled above it. The dial was currently set to zero.

“But make no mistake,” Fuchs continued, “zhey are in grave danger. As much danger as you wish zhem to be.”

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PRESSURE

After Matthew stopped turning, the crazy old woman finally finished screaming in his ear. The earpiece had been placed on the side of his face that had been horrifically burned and intermingled seamlessly with his melted flesh. It was clear they didn't want the rest of the children to know that he had a direct line with the people behind the games.

Is she telling me the truth? Matthew wondered. *Would they really let me out of here?*

He wasn't sure. Even though they'd reassured him so many times during his recovery, each time he heard the wicked woman squawk in his ear, he trusted her less. While he trusted the men that had cared for him while he was healing a little more, he didn't trust them that much more.

It's all I want . . . to be back home again.

Watching wrestling alone in his room while freestyling with his yo-yo, or even playing video games while his dad was passed out drunk, seemed like a dream. He'd take whatever he could get.

Anything but this . . .

Matthew thought about The Bad Guy, Razor Ramon. Sometimes you had to do nasty things to get ahead in life. Sometimes you had to lie or cheat to win. Sometimes you had to be The Bad Guy.

I'm gonna have to do whatever it takes to get out of this place.

Matthew had been so lost in his own mind that he hadn't even begun to grasp the magnitude of his disfigurement and how it would impact the rest of his life. He was too busy wondering if there was even going to *be* a "rest of his life."

His body trembled as he stood watching Josh finish fastening the fan blade to Danny's leg. Both Marco and Josh were wearing what was left of their shirts. Like Josh's shirt, Marco's was also cut to hell, but in addition it was smeared with copious amounts of blood from Danny's leaky leg.

"Thanks," Danny said, grimacing in pain.

He looked at the pieces Josh had torn off from his oversized T-shirt that now covered his ankle wound and held the fan blade fixed to his leg. Luckily the fan blades were long, straight, and light—otherwise it would've slowed Danny down more than it helped him.

"Where'd you learn how to do that?" Steph asked, looking at the makeshift splint.

"One time, when I was about six years old, I went on a camping trip with my dad and Uncle Ernie," Josh said. "They both ended up getting pretty banged-up."

"What's that mean?" Kayla asked.

"They were doing bad stuff," Josh said. "Like drinking whiskey and doing cocaine."

"Oh . . ."

Marco and Josh locked eyes momentarily.

"Yeah, like I said, bad stuff. Anyway, my Uncle Ernie was goofing around and climbed a tree. He ended up falling out of it and snapping his ankle. My dad had to use a few tree branches to make a splint for him."

"Your dad sounds like a smart guy," Steph said.

"I wouldn't know." Josh stood up. "That was the last time I ever saw him."

Matthew could see the sadness on Steph's face. He knew the story probably should've made him feel something as well, but he was numb. All he could think about was his own situation—his own survival.

Oh God . . .

As Matthew's eyes came up from Danny's leg, he happened to glance down the hallway. His heart dropped as in the distance he saw it—what he could only imagine to be the thing that the other children had told him was chasing them. Silently lying in wait, blanketed by darkness, the dead woman's heinous grin loomed. Beside her unsettling smile were her sharp fingers and the rotten flesh stretched over them.

"Guys!" Matthew yelled. "It—it's her! Watch out!"

It didn't take long for the other kids to see her.

“Shit, it’s Mildred!” Josh cried. “Hurry!”

And no sooner than he spoke did Mildred step out of the shadows. She elevated off the ground about an inch as half-circle wheels pushed out from the bottom of her feet and she started to roll forward.

Marco and Josh each took hold of Danny and hoisted him up.

“Help him and I’ll get the door!” Josh yelled at Matthew.

I’ve gotta do something, he thought. *Don’t want them to think I’m not pulling my weight. Little things might help.*

Matthew did as he was told and helped Danny toward the door, where Steph had already ushered Kayla.

Josh took hold of the handle and yanked the door open.

“Hurry,” Steph said, helping to guide everyone in.

But as Josh’s turn came, Matthew watched on in horror. Mildred’s sharp claws raked down Josh’s back as he slipped inside, causing him to emit a bloodcurdling moan.

Steph shrieked but was able to get the door closed before Mildred could get inside, and instantly the new clock started to tick.

“Oh my god, Josh!” Steph yelled, squatting and looking at the gruesome wounds.

His shirt had already been shredded to ribbons from using pieces of it for Danny’s splint. The several red lines that ran down his back were wet with blood. The series of lacerations looked nasty.

“I . . . I’m okay,” Josh said, feeling his back.

“They’re bleeding some,” Marco said, biting his bottom lip. “But after seeing what happened to Teddy and Jazmine, it could’ve been a lot worse.”

“Who’s Teddy?” Matthew asked.

“He was one of us . . . kind of,” Kayla said.

Steph stroked Josh’s shoulder, trying to comfort him. “Does it hurt?”

“Almost as bad as when you were holding my hand back there.” Josh brandished a slight grin. “Your grip is like a pair of pliers.”

Steph giggled and then punched him playfully. “Hey, shut up.”

Now that Josh’s injuries didn’t seem fatal, Matthew turned his attention from the kids to their surroundings. The hallway they’d entered this time was different from the last. Instead of hard metal, they were surrounded by the inflatable walls again. He looked down at the fan blade attached to Danny’s leg.

“Guys . . .” Matthew whispered.

The kids all looked at him like he was a monk that had just broken a vow of silence.

“Yeah . . . ?” Marco said.

Matthew slowly ran his fingers over the vinyl material of a wall as he worked out his idea. “Couldn’t we just use that fan blade to stab through these walls?”

“You joined us a little late,” Danny said, grimacing as he maneuvered himself. Matthew was almost surprised at how well he could control his body with the splint. “Those walls aren’t filled with air. They’re filled with gas.”

“Really awful gas,” Marco added.

“Good thing someone told him,” Steph said.

“Yeah, whatever you do, don’t cut the walls. That rat turned to . . .” Marco stopped. It was like he’d said something he didn’t mean to.

Josh hung his head, suddenly sad.

“Anyway,” Marco said, “just trust us . . . you don’t want to do it. If you do, then we’re all dead meat.”

“Scream,” the old woman’s voice whispered into Matthew’s ear through the transmitter.

Matthew hesitated for a minute.

“Scream or I promise I’ll give you something to scream about!” she continued.

“Ahhhhhh!” Matthew bellowed.

He furrowed his brow in confusion, unsure why he was being told to yell.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

He let out a second one for good measure, wanting to ensure that the wicked woman was appeased.

“What’s wrong?” Kayla asked.

“Try to calm down,” Steph said. “I know this is scary, but it’ll be okay.” But she didn’t sound so convinced. “We’ve made it this far, right?”

Danny bit his lip, still trying to find a way to deal with the pain. “Barely . . .”

“We’re not going to make it any farther if we don’t keep moving,” Marco said, turning to the sign on the door. “ ‘Playground Rules . . . This room is simple: Just take two shots. Either make the baskets, or the blade

will drop. Heads will roll, bodies will flop. Because a measly neck won't withstand the chop' . . ."

"Not gonna lie," Josh said, shaking his head and pulling himself to his feet. "This one sounds kinda bad."

Marco turned reluctantly toward the hallway. "No matter how bad it sounds, I guess we'd better check it out sooner than later."

The kids made their way around the corner into a circular room. As soon as they entered the room, the screaming started. Steph and Kayla were the loudest.

While Matthew didn't know anything about the girls or the black man strapped into some device at the far end of the room, the sheer horror in their voices told him they all had to somehow be connected.

"Give me a good look at the girl," the old woman commanded.

Matthew turned to angle his vest at Steph as she broke down. She'd gone from being somewhat hopeful to complete shambles.

That's what this place can do to you.

The wooden floor had all the typical paint you'd see on a basketball court. But the hoop at the end was anything but traditional. The pole the hoop usually resided on had been replaced with a guillotine. The blade sat just above the backboard, an ominous reminder of what was on the line. The hoop was affixed to the backboard like any other.

"Coach Cal!" Steph yelled.

At the base of the guillotine, strapped to a table with his head stuck in the hole between two wooden boards, was who Matthew now knew to be Coach Cal. Sadly, the gag wedged in his mouth prevented him from offering his pupil any words of wisdom.

Steph ran toward her coach while Kayla cried and trailed behind her. But before they could reach him, a crackle erupted from Matthew's vest.

"Stop where you are!" the old woman yelled.

Steph froze at mid court beside a small table that held a single basketball.

"Another step and you'll regret it!" the woman continued. "You'll have *zero* chance of saving him!"

"Why are you doing this?!" Steph cried.

"The *why* is too complex for your juvenile brains to digest. Maybe you should just worry about the *how*. Like *how* you're going to make the shot that saves your friend's life. I've been informed that you're quite talented at

this idiotic sport. This means you have a chance—and a chance is better than nothing, wouldn't you say?"

"I . . . I can't do this," Steph said.

Matthew watched as her body began trembling uncontrollably. His heart ached for her, but he was also somewhat relieved not to be involved.

"Oh, but you must," the woman said. "We've created this specific room with you in mind. This is your moment. No matter what game you would've gone on to play outside of this place, nothing could be more important than this—the pupil rescuing her master . . . or being the arbiter of his demise."

"P-p-please," Kayla wailed. "Don't hurt Coach Cal!"

"I'm afraid that's not up to me, dear," the nasty woman said. "That's up to your sister." She cleared her throat. "Now, I will give you some time to prepare. But just remember, the clock's ticking . . . and you know who's waiting for you on the other side of that door."

Matthew looked at the rest of the kids. They were every bit as flabbergasted as he was.

"Tampering with or touching the guillotine will result in an instant beheading," she continued. "It's simple. Just land two shots from the free-throw line and it's over—well, for now anyway. But remember, I'll be watching."

Steph dropped to her knees and completely broke down. Matthew watched her, wondering how she would find the strength to take the shot, when his thoughts were suddenly interrupted.

"Be ready," the wicked old woman growled in his ear.

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SHOT OF A LIFETIME

“You can make it,” Josh said, doing his best to encourage Steph. “I’ve watched you out on that court at the Boys & Girls Club more than I should admit. I . . . I *know* you can.”

While Steph was grateful for the vote of confidence and the compliment, Josh’s kind words didn’t stunt her fear. Glancing up into Coach Cal’s teary and terrified eyes made it feel like a power drill was burrowing through her soul.

Everything was so quiet. The only thing Steph could hear was Kayla’s sobs and a strange whirring noise that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. When she looked over her shoulder to investigate, she saw Matthew with a slightly warped, black and red yo-yo. The boy looked terrified—lost in his own mind, desperately trying to distract himself from the horror they faced.

“Steph, I would never try and rush you on something like this,” Danny said, “but . . .”

“I know,” she said, standing up and taking a deep breath.

Steph walked over to her sister, who continued to sob. Coach Cal was like a father to them. She would’ve been surprised if Kayla wasn’t every bit as upset as she was.

“Don’t worry,” Kayla cried. “You’ll make it! I-I’ve seen you make it a thousand times.”

But how many times have I missed it? Steph thought.

Steph peeled herself away from her sister and took hold of the ball. She spun it in her hands, familiarizing herself with every groove. Hands

shaking, she dribbled her way up to the free-throw line. After a few breathing exercises and some dribbling, Steph was able to steady her hands.

Please, God. Make free throws become my strength today . . .

She couldn't look Coach Cal in the eyes; knowing his life was on the line was too distracting. Steph closed her eyes and wiped her mind clear. When she opened them again, they were only focused on the hoop. Feeling the weight of the ball, she readied herself. After carefully elevating it, she aimed and took the shot. But as she flicked her wrist, her concentration was suddenly broken.

"Ahhhhhhh!" Matthew screamed at the top of his lungs.

Despite Matthew's shriek, when the ball left Steph's fingers, she felt like the arc was perfect. Its rainbow trajectory was headed right for the bucket. When the ball bounced off the back of the hoop and the aluminum board, it kicked up in the air, rotating with extreme speed.

As Steph watched the ball spin, all the moments that she and Kayla had spent with Coach Cal ran through her mind. The endless kind words and encouragement he'd offered them. His glowing, fatherly smile that was always happy to see them. The countless hours he'd spent beside them during practice and the guidance he provided was the greatest gift of all: a healthy distraction from their home life. With the constant terror and dysfunction that Steph's parents fostered at home, Coach Cal and their shared love of basketball were the only things that had brought her joy during a long stretch of darkness.

But as the ball hit the outside rim, it was clear the run they'd enjoyed together was over.

When the shot rolled out, Steph let out a shriek like she was being murdered. In a way, she was. Coach Cal was a part of who she was—a *big* part. And as the dreadful sound of the guillotine dropping echoed in her eardrums, she tried to grasp the idea that there was nothing she could do to stop it.

The blade cut clean through Coach Cal's neck and sent blood shooting in all directions. His head slid down to the bottom of the guillotine, where Steph quickly realized there was no basket, but instead, a small, curved piece of wood. As the head rolled over the bend, it gained more momentum —enough to carry it out onto the court, just short of the free-throw line.

Steph looked down at her feet and watched Coach Cal's head spasm as a series of bizarre facial expressions manifested. His trembling, bloody face

was sickening. Her stomach had already started to rumble before the decapitated cranium had even reached her. The disturbing nature of the mental short-circuit, extreme violence, and the puddle of blood growing from his slashed throat took everything out of her. She couldn’t hold in her emotions, or the contents of her gut.

The tears and vomit purged simultaneously. A stream of white and green liquid puke twisted out of her throat, coating Coach Cal’s twitching face.

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SECOND CHANCE

“Why the heck did you do that?!” Kayla cried. “Y-you messed her up!”

“Seriously,” Josh barked, grabbing hold of Matthew’s vest, “what the fuck is wrong with you, man?!”

Josh was steaming inside. He felt like putting his hands around Matthew’s neck and squeezing until it snapped. He didn’t have many things in life. Seeing Steph happy—even if it wasn’t him making her happy—was one of the few things that brought him joy.

“I-I’m sorry,” Matthew squealed. “I didn’t mean to . . . I-I’m just messed up in the head. Ever since I got burned, I hear screaming sometimes! My *own* screaming! I didn’t mean it, you’ve gotta believe me!”

Josh tossed the boy aside and made his way to Steph.

“God, Steph,” Josh said, emotion altering his tone. “I’m sorry.”

The speaker on Matthew’s vest crackled again.

“You might all be even sorrier in just a moment,” the old woman said. “Playground Rules say she must take *two* shots. And since the stakes have already . . . *split* . . . I’ll give you exactly two minutes to remove Coach Cal’s body from the device, and strap her little sister in.”

“Nooooo!” Steph screamed. “You’re fucking crazy!”

The wicked woman laughed. “Call it what you will, dear. Regardless, you have two minutes until that door opens. And I know Mother would *love* to see you again.”

Josh’s fear and confusion overtook him as he pounded his fists at his side. There was no way to protest and not enough time to think. He looked at Marco.

“We . . . we’ve gotta start taking him out,” Josh said, looking at Coach Cal’s corpse. “You saw what Mildred did to the others. She nearly killed me too. If it gets through that door then we’re all dead.”

Marco said nothing but followed Josh’s lead. They ran to Coach Cal’s headless body and loosened the straps. As quickly and respectfully as possible, they dragged him off the bloody plank of wood.

“Kayla, no!” Steph cried.

The little girl had already wiped the tears off her cheeks and accepted her fate, en route to the hoop. Steph’s cries made her pause.

“I have to.” Kayla’s bottom lip quivered. “If I don’t . . . none of us have a chance. I know you won’t miss it twice. You never miss twice, Steph. Remember?”

Steph nodded, trying to control her crying as she watched the boys usher her sister into the guillotine. Kayla continued to sob when the wooden boards slid together, trapping her head. Josh and Marco backed away, horrified by their participation.

“I’m here for you, Steph,” Danny said, balancing on his good leg while the tears streamed down his face. “No matter what happens, I’m here.”

Steph looked too devastated and focused to respond. But as she reached for the ball, the speaker on Matthew’s vest crackled again. Her lip curled in disgust at the sound of the sinister hag’s voice.

“I forgot one thing, dear,” the old woman said in a snide tone. “You won’t be using the basketball for this shot. No, you’ll be using Coach’s head . . .”

A dead silence filled the room.

“You have exactly twenty seconds to take the shot,” she added.

God, how much more can she take? Josh thought, shaking his head in sheer astonishment.

He figured the sickening stipulation would’ve been the straw that broke the camel’s back, but as Steph looked down at Coach Cal’s vomit-covered head, it was clear she felt something else. Maybe she felt the power of her mentor’s spirit guiding her. Maybe she felt the sense of belief her sister and everyone else had in her.

There was no way to know. But when she bent over and lifted Coach Cal’s slimy head off the ground, he finally realized why he truly had a crush on her.

Steph was gritty and real—not like the other girls who all seemed to be putting on an act. They were projecting personalities that they thought the people around them wanted to see. They were influenced by society and peer pressure. Steph was just Steph, and in Josh's eyes, that was more than enough. She wasn't the type of girl to let life beat her down. She beat the shit out of life until it molded to accommodate *her*.

As she looked up at the hoop and tried to gauge the weight of Coach Cal's head, the fire in her eyes burned bright like a flock of monarchs.

"Five seconds!" the old woman barked.

As Steph lofted the head up, she unleashed a hellish scream—like a fierce warrior charging into battle. The cranium flipped around, dribbling a trail of blood and barf over the floor en route to the hoop.

The dead man's skull didn't hit the backboard or rim. The net wedged in the teeth of the head's agape mouth and Coach Cal dangled, stuck in the mesh. Josh listened to the swish and paused, staring at the horrifying sight of the grinning severed head.

Inside, he couldn't help but feel like Coach Cal had given Steph one final smile.

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GROWING IMPATIENT

“That bitch!” Geraldine yelled, standing up and slamming her fist into the control panel several times.

Rock secretly enjoyed every second of her tirade. While he was relieved the children had advanced, he felt more guilt crushing his soul. After all, he’d quietly gone along with Fuchs and helped him kidnap Teddy and Jazmine, and he was the one who’d strapped Coach Cal into the guillotine. And now they were all dead.

All so she could have a surprise, Rock thought.

Surprises were usually gifts, parties, or maybe dinner reservations for most people. But for Geraldine they were decapitations, impalements, or dismemberments.

“I have a good mind to let Mother loose!” she yelled.

“But what about zhe rest of zhe rooms in zhe prototype? Zhere is so much more fun to be had.”

She shrieked in frustration, clenching her fists and dentures. “But how . . . how did she do that?!”

“She is a talented player,” Fuchs said. “But trust in me—no amount of talent or luck will allow zhe children to pass zhe next phase unscathed.”

His words seemed to calm her. She exhaled and turned her attention back to the monitor.

“I suppose it would be nice to see them suffer some . . .” Geraldine said. As she took her seat again, the ’rhoid cushion squealed. “Let the loss of their beloved coach eat at them some before they meet their fate.”

While Rock had no choice but to listen to their grotesque exchange, inside he knew his brain wasn't wired like theirs. When he saw other people in pain, he felt the reverberations. But even though he wasn't like them, he couldn't help but feel like he was no better.

"Exactly, my lady," Fuchs said. "Zhe boy did his part, just as we believed he would. He screamed on command, like a little lap dog. Zhere is no doubt zhat he will be an asset to us moving forward."

Geraldine's eyes shifted back toward the screen. "You were right." Another thought suddenly came to her. "But what if he dies?"

"Zhen so does zhe spirit of zhe wildcard. But we can always have one of zhe ozher children don his vest if we must."

A giant grin spread across Geraldine's face. "It's good to know we have a backup plan."

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SUPER SOAKED

Marco looked at the sign on the back of the metal door and shook his head. The rest of the kids were just as shaken as he was. A dark and somber mood had taken hold of the group since watching Coach Cal get beheaded. Like the other kids, Marco had thrown up some. Josh had to physically shake him before he was able to snap out of the shock.

This is looking worse and worse, Marco thought.

In the beginning, the adrenaline had made him come alive like a roaring dragon. But after so much stress and mental punishment, he was starting to come down. The grim reality they faced wasn't in their favor. He recognized that there was a very good chance Coach Cal's death wasn't the last he'd see.

Marco took a deep breath. " 'Playground Rules: Stand in place and take your square. Touch the color shown or find despair. Keep up pace as the clock runs out, or get a squirt that'll make you shout' . . ."

Everyone remained quiet. When Marco glanced back at the group, they looked like they'd just finished fighting in the Royal Rumble.

"We'd better go," Josh said.

Marco nodded. "Yeah."

When they reached the end of the hallway, they could see the next steel advancement door in the room it led them to. Within the inflated walls of the space was a strange sight. Hammered into the floor were what looked like a dozen Twister mats. Four digital signs hung on the wall that read:

Left Foot.

Right Foot.

Left Hand.

Right Hand.

But it wasn't the Twister mats that bothered Marco so much as what hung above them. Normally, whenever he'd seen a *Super Soaker 50*, he was filled with excitement. But as he looked at the Super Soaker water guns mounted above each of the Twister mats, he knew something horrible must be inside their plastic green tanks of ammo.

A squirt that'll make you shout . . .

He'd already learned that in a place as cruel as the Playground, nothing was what it seemed. Even the most fun things were turned into vehicles for violence.

"Take your places!" the old woman screamed through the crackling speaker.

Marco and some of the others jumped, having almost forgotten that she was with them, looming like an angry ghost haunting the entire group and spooking them from time to time.

A few of the children mumbled to each other nervously or offered words of support as they lined up. The mats were set up in two rows of six. The children stuck together, taking the front row closest to the door and the command screens. From the left wall to the right wall, it was Matthew, Josh, Marco, Steph, Kayla, and Danny.

"And pay attention closely," the wicked woman whispered as the first board lit and the clock activated. "If you miss a color, or if your hands or feet come off the mat . . . well, I suppose that's that . . ."

Two minutes appeared on the clock and immediately started to tick down just as the first command board lit up. A robotic voice read the color and corresponding body part aloud.

"Left Foot: Green."

The Super Soaker handles pumped themselves once.

Just focus, Marco thought. *You're good at games.*

The children all promptly obeyed the command, as well as the ones that followed.

"Right Foot: Blue."

"Left Hand: Red."

"Right Hand: Red."

Each of the Super Soakers continued to auto-pump with the reveal of each new command. Marco knew from experience that after four pumps,

they were now ready to shoot.

Most of the kids were able to keep up through the first several commands with ease—until a sudden complaint.

“I should’ve taken off this thing before I started,” Danny cried. “I—I can’t bend my leg!”

Marco let his eyes dart for just a second down past Steph and Kayla to Danny. He could see the sweat pouring off his head. He’d seen Danny’s incredible gymnastic feats at the Boys & Girls Club and figured this game would be a piece of cake for someone as athletic and flexible as Danny. But the extreme events on the basketball court had thrown everyone’s mental game off. They’d all lost track of the details. Furthermore, it wasn’t like the witch talking through the speaker was giving them any time to think.

“Keep going!” Steph yelled. “You have to!”

He could tell that it took everything for her to break concentration and offer those words of encouragement. When Marco looked up at the clock, he felt the sweat in his eyes burning.

“Just one more minute!” Marco yelled. “Hang on!”

As he gazed back down at his Twister mat, the bloody, sweat-soaked socks tied around Marco’s head started to slip. Part of him was happy to see the nasty things fall to the floor. The constant smell of curdled milk hovering near his nose kept him on the verge of barfing. But they were serving a purpose. He was grateful that when the socks finally fell, he didn’t feel any blood coming out of his ear.

Just keep going, Marco thought.

Marco continued to keep his focus on the game and obeyed the commands of the changing colors. But his attention was again snatched when he suddenly heard a loud groan.

“I . . . I’m losing it!” Danny cried.

The loud hiss of chemical compound exiting the Super Soaker pointed directly at his face was the precursor to a guttural scream. It sounded like a mother being told one of her children had died while having her leg sawed off. As the flesh was power-washed off Danny’s face, areas of his skull became visible. He slapped his hands over his gory face and rolled off to the side, limbs flailing about like a nest of snakes.

Danny’s violent body movements caused his injured leg to brush up against the inflated wall. A jagged piece of the splint that Josh had tied to

him sliced a small laceration into the vinyl, triggering a purple haze to begin pouring out.

Screaming in terror, Marco looked up at the clock.

Thirty seconds!

“Danny!” Steph screamed.

“The gas!” Kayla cried. “He—he cut the wall!”

“Don’t stop!” Steph continued to follow the commands while trying to have a conversation with her sister as the distance between them and the deadly gas shortened.

“But it—it’s getting closer!”

Steph looked up at the clock. “Just a few more seconds!”

Marco peeked at Danny’s body on the ground, now motionless. The peeled tissue and meat from his face was gone, revealing a horrifying skeleton grimace.

Just ten seconds!

But that wasn’t enough for Kayla.

Her cough started out slow. Then the noxious gas paralyzed her body altogether, triggering the Super Soaker to blast her in the chest.

“Kayla!” Steph cried. “No!”

“Time’s up,” the computerized voice said.

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As the stream of acid finished pissing into the hole in Kayla's torso, she lay still. Several of her internal organs were visible, while others had liquified in the pool of carnal sludge that now filled the massive crater in her chest. As the disgusting blend of blood and acid bubbled, it looked like a swamp of death had been planted inside her.

"We can't stay any longer!" Josh yelled, heading for the door, where Matthew was already waiting.

"We . . . we've gotta go," Marco said, grabbing Steph.

"I can't leave her!" she wailed.

Marco saw the gas getting closer as Steph inched toward her dead sister. He wasn't strong enough to carry her away, but he imagined that she needed to feel his tug—to have someone else be the reason she left her sister behind.

"C'mon, Steph," Marco said, pulling her arm in the direction of the door.

She continued to fight him, until the fight lessened, and she was stumbling toward the door alongside him, crying hysterically.

Marco couldn't imagine how she felt. While he was horrified by the violent deaths, he didn't really know Danny and Kayla like Steph did. He'd looked at such things in a much different way before now. Back at the Boys & Girls Club, he would've loved to have them as friends—he would've loved to have *anyone* as a friend. But as Marco glanced back at the bubbling cave of death in Kayla's chest and Danny's sizzling skull, he realized that not knowing them well was a blessing in disguise.

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SNACK TIME

As Rock stood in the kitchen, he thought about the children he'd just watched melt away. He'd felt so alone and helpless. Geraldine and Fuchs were bonded by their hatred of children; meanwhile, he couldn't comprehend it. How could he have when, in many ways, inside he was still a child himself?

One way or another, they're all gonna end up like that, Rock thought.

The idea of trying to stop them was still in the back of his mind. But the twisted life he'd led since arriving at The Borden Estate was all he knew. If he was to stop them, it couldn't be with his might or power. It would have to be with his brain.

That's hopeless . . .

As he arranged several cheeses, jams, sliced meats, and crackers on the wooden, pig-shaped cutting board, the feeling of defeat resurfaced.

They're so much smarter than me . . .

Rock had never been a man confident in anything he'd done. Manipulating people was something others did to him, not something he did to others.

Maybe I won't manipulate them. I'm not sure I could anyway. I'd need to convince them . . .

As he lifted the tray and walked carefully, he tried to think of how he might justify such compassion. He didn't have any leverage, so whatever argument he thought up would have to be indisputable. But even when he racked his brain thinking about all the various pieces, nothing seemed to line up.

Think, dummy . . .

Rock headed back to the control room to serve them, knowing he would need to think, and think fast. He had a tall order in front of him; hunting for the proper logic that could sway a pair of psychopaths was no easy task.

And there wasn't much time left.

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RISING TENSION

Matthew watched as Josh consoled Steph. She continued to sob into his chest, wetting his shredded T-shirt. Everyone seemed lost. Even Marco, who'd been a major force keeping the group moving along, was slumped on the floor donning a thousand-yard stare in disbelief.

"Get them moving," the evil woman whispered through Matthew's earpiece. "And you'd better be ready if I need to call on you again. Remember—do as I say until the end, and you'll see those two lovely parents again . . ."

The command sent a chill down Matthew's spine. He thought about being in the comfort and safety of his home again. But the Playground made his fantasy seem so far-fetched. The constant stress he faced made the woman's words seem like an impossible reward.

She keeps saying it, Matthew thought. *Maybe if I just do exactly what she tells me, they really will bring me back home. But what's she gonna want me to do?!*

Whether she was telling the truth or not, listening to the woman and following the Playground Rules was the surest way to stay alive.

"Hey, guys," Matthew said.

No one responded.

"Guys," he continued, "don't you think we should read the next set of rules?"

"I don't know," Josh said. "Should we? Do you know something that we don't?"

"N-no," Matthew said. "What do you mean?"

“I mean you haven’t done anything to help us stay alive this far. Actually, you’ve hurt us. But now, all of a sudden, you’re ready to lead?”

“No—that’s not true! I-I told you guys when I saw Mildred, and no one else did! I didn’t hurt anyone!”

A fire lit in Josh’s eyes as he leaned Steph against the wall and stood.

“Didn’t hurt anyone?!” Josh screamed. “You’re probably the reason Coach is dead! I should punch you right in that stupid, melted fucking face of yours!”

As Josh cocked his fist back, Marco stood and tried to stop him. But the punch was too fast. When Josh’s knuckles connected with Matthew’s chin, it rocked his jaw, sending him crashing to the ground.

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THE POGO PUZZLE

Marco watched Matthew finally shake off the punch. He retreated to the other side of the room and started crying.

“He definitely screwed up,” Marco said. “But he did say it was an accident.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a pretty big fucking accident,” Josh said. “A man is dead because of it.”

Steph had nothing to say; she just continued to weep.

Slurping the saliva through his retainer, Marco nodded. “I agree, but we need to stick together. I really believe the only reason the four of us have made it this far is because we worked together.”

Josh pointed at Matthew aggressively. “Yeah, we all worked together—except for that piece of shit.”

“Okay, that’s fair,” Marco said. “But now that there’s . . . less of us, it means we need his help even more.” He turned to the battered boy. “You think you can work with us, Matthew? We need everyone if we’re going to get through this.”

“If we *can* even get through it,” Steph cried, wiping the snot from her nose. “Who even says it’s possible?”

“Anything’s possible,” Marco said. “Matthew was right about one thing—we’ve been sitting here awhile already, and we need to read these next rules.”

Before Marco turned around, he took a moment to look at the room. He was so depressed and lost in his mind when they’d entered, he’d neglected the environment.

A large, free-standing wall stood in front of them, the top of which he couldn't see over and there was no way to climb. Near the wall stood a bike rack, but instead of bikes, securely locked in place were a dozen pogo sticks. And beside the rack, on a small stand, stood a black-and-white-checkered board.

I'll focus on that after I read, Marco thought.

He turned to the sign.

"Crap," Marco said.

"What?" Steph asked with a nip of fear in her tone.

"All the time's almost gone already! This—this clock must've had less time!"

Everyone was suddenly aware of the urgency of the situation. Matthew and Steph, both still sobbing, but were now on their feet. Josh took a step forward, feeling the metal plate on the ground slightly shift—it was loose.

"Better read it fast then," Josh said.

Marco focused on the text. " 'Playground Rules: You must solve the puzzle before you bounce. Then once over the wall you'll select your route. Slide all the way down and be sure not to fall. Because you'll still need to play some dodgeball' . . ."

They all immediately rushed over to the pogo sticks. But as Marco had noticed earlier, as Josh tried to pull them out of the rack, they wouldn't budge.

"We've gotta finish the puzzle first to unlock them!" Marco said frantically.

"Well, figure it out!" Steph shrieked.

When he looked at the black-and-white checkerboard, part of him was relieved—chess was a game he'd spent many hours on. He thought about playing *Battle Chess* on his computer before he'd fried the circuit board with Crystal Pepsi. Even if he didn't have a working computer back home, he'd have traded anything to be back there. He forced himself to forget about home and focus on the task in front of him.

When he looked at the chessboard closer, Marco realized that there were eight squares with black borders in the center. Additionally, at the bottom of the board, there were eight individual buttons adjacent to the spaces.

Marco pressed the first one, which caused the corresponding square to instantly flip. The letter *A* now occupied the square.

"What the hell does this mean?" Josh asked.

“Look, there’s a clue!” Matthew said.

Hanging on the wall just above the board was a simple rhyme that consisted of two lines.

Marco keyed in on it. “ ‘I am one word; spell me out to advance. Only the king and the rook can do my dance’ . . .”

Josh pulled his hair. “Man, how do they expect us to—”

Ding! Ding! Ding!

The clock on the door sounded and everyone except Marco turned to look.

As Marco continued to cycle through various chess terms in his head, a light bulb suddenly went off. He recalled the special move where the king and one of the rooks are moved simultaneously, usually to protect the king.

“Oh shit,” Josh said, looking back at the door.

“It’s ‘castling’!” Marco yelled, desperately starting to mash the buttons on the board.

“Quick, spell it out then!” Josh screamed, dashing toward the door. He stopped before the entrance and tried to pry up the metal floor plate.

Marco already had several letters done. While he was working on entering the *T*, he used his second hand to start turning the other letters.

“Almost there!” Marco yelled.

Sweating as he heard the metal door unsealing, Josh stared forward, still yanking. “I—I’ll try to hold her off!”

Just before the hinge squeaked open, Josh was able to tear up the loose metal that he’d stepped on before. It was heavy, but not too heavy for him to lift. He held it in front of his chest for protection.

Right as Marco finished flipping the final letter of the word CASTLING, he heard the pogo sticks unlock.

Mildred’s rotten face appeared, still speckled with the blood of children. As the robot stepped through the door, Josh screamed, charging her with the steel.

“Go!” Marco said, pointing at the pogo sticks.

Mildred immediately slammed her steel fist into Josh’s torso, denting the metal plate inward and sending him flying onto his backside.

“What about Josh?!” Steph yelled.

“Let me worry about him!” Marco said.

As Steph and Matthew both took hold of their pogo sticks, Marco turned to find Josh on his back, seeing stars. Mildred loomed over him

ominously, her rotten husk draped over her powerful body like a condom that had been used for generations hanging off a clean cock.

What the hell can I do? Marco wondered.

He was terrified, and he knew he wasn't strong enough to defeat the robot. He grabbed one of the pogo sticks and looked at Steph and Matthew, who were starting to get momentum. The sticks were not normal: the more the children bounced, the higher they got—like there was no limit to their ability.

I should just go with them . . .

As Mildred raised one foot and prepared to stomp Josh's chest, Marco remembered his first encounter with the killer cyborg. How Josh risked life and limb to carry him to safety. He felt the scabby slice on the side of his head where a piece of his ear was missing, knowing full well that if Josh hadn't acted, he wouldn't even have the opportunity to decide if he wanted to be as brave as he'd been.

"Fuck it," Marco said. "Hey, Robo-Bitch!"

Marco rushed Mildred from behind and swung the pogo stick into her back with everything he could. The robot froze in place and turned toward him. He continued to strike it, swinging up toward Mildred's face.

"Run, Josh!" Marco yelled.

Josh remained dazed, the heavy metal weighing down on him as Marco took another swing, this time hitting the mask of fetid skin on Mildred's face. But he realized that none of his blows were having an impact, and a sense of impending doom took hold of him.

Mildred's pointed fingers suddenly spread, and their cold steel tips plunged deep into Marco's belly. The agony and ripping sensation caused him to drop the pogo stick.

Marco felt her hand taking hold of his stomach, and as Mildred lifted him in the air until they were eyelevel, he clawed the rubbery mask of skin off her face.

An exploding sound, like an overfilled balloon popping, echoed. When the organ erupted, the contents of Marco's stomach oozed out of the hole in his belly. Along with the blood, the partially digested food looked like a combination of the curdled milk he'd ingested and liquid feces.

Bits of nasty gunk and blood rushed up his esophagus and out of his mouth. The crimson barf knocked his retainer sideways, leaving it floating in his mouth like a plastic raft riding a wave of filth. But as the pain

intensified, somehow his focus did as well. Between Mildred's eyes, where her mask of flesh previously rested, he could see a small slit. The green circuit board beneath her metallic face was the same as his computer at home. Its circuitry called to him as he recalled what had transpired back in his room.

Mildred opened her mouth to reveal a drill bit the size of a sausage link. As its metal spiral started to turn, Mildred pulled Marco closer, undoubtedly preparing to try and impale his brain again. But as Marco reached inside his mouth and pulled out the wet retainer, he grinned.

"This is *Battle Chess*, n-not checkers," Marco said.

He jammed the soaked metal corner of the retainer into the slit and scrambled it around. Sparks erupted as an electrical jolt rumbled through his body. Mildred started to move manically, like she'd lost control of her body. Smoke poured out from the slit alongside the sparks as a mini fire broke out inside her head.

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Mildred’s grip on his innards faltered, and Marco fell to the ground. The robot ran into the wall before its head exploded. Steel shrapnel flew in all directions as Mildred fell over on her side.

Through his glossy eyes, Marco could see the blast had awoken Josh. The metal panel on top of him had helped save him from the fiery fragments. Josh pushed the sheet off his body and quickly crawled to Marco’s side.

“No!” Josh cried. “You can’t . . . you—”

“Hey . . .” Marco spat up more blood, trying to muster the strength to talk. “I-I owed you th-th-this one. You . . . you saved my butt back there.”

“That’s what friends do,” Josh said, tears running down both cheeks.

“Yeah.” Marco forced his bloody grimace to momentarily change into a grin. “Friends . . .”

“C’mon.” Josh went to lift him up. “I’m not leaving you behind—I-I won’t.”

Marco cried out in pain. “I just—I can’t.” He was whispering, since no energy remained in his body. “Don’t feel bad . . . that phone call . . . you gave me exactly what I needed.”

Tears continued to stream down Josh’s face as his lips quivered.

Marco reached out and squeezed his hand. “This friendship . . . it was just . . . what I . . .”

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DEAD AGAIN

As Matthew's camera pointed down from the top of the platform, capturing the other boy's final moments, Geraldine shook her head. She wasn't focused on the death but instead on the cybernetic corpse and rotten flesh piled on the other side of the screen.

"Mother . . ." Geraldine whispered as tears welled in her eyes.

"I am sorry, my lady," Fuchs said.

Flashes erupted in Geraldine's mind: the old wrestling matches she'd had with her mother as a little girl; the bloody pad she'd sniffed so lovingly; the log of feces she'd used to masturbate and then nibbled on. Everything uncorked, right up until the final moments when she'd sat on her face. And even past her death, when Fuchs had created the robotic version to keep her sexually satisfied, made a cameo. She shuddered at the thought of the mushed maggots. The thought of the crushed snatch-larvae paste in her mouth and up her nose continuing to throb made her feel ill.

"Maybe it's for the best that she's gone," Geraldine said. "It was nice to see her though."

"Zhat it was . . . zhat it was." Fuchs pointed at the dead boy on the screen. "Anozher one down."

"Mother was no pushover," Geraldine said, sounding proud of her. "She took out three of them. It was almost too many."

"Like you said . . ." Fuchs picked up a cracker and piece of cheese and fired it into his mouth. "As disheartening as it is, maybe it is for zhe best."

She recalled the very reason she'd taken interest in writing her poems. It was her mother that she'd learned from. Without Mildred's influence, she

might not have come up with the idea of Playground Rules. The sadness in Geraldine's gut started to dissipate until the disgust finally returned.

She will live on through the challenges that lie ahead, Geraldine thought. *She will live on long afterward too, when I finish constructing the Playground in the bowels of my castle. She will live on . . .*

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A MOMENT OF CLARITY

Josh vaulted up into the air, his momentum carrying him onto the platform that Steph and Matthew had already reached. When he landed, he crumpled to the ground, still in tears—still not over Marco's death.

While he'd only known Marco in passing, there was something about him. He couldn't shake the vibe that made him feel like they'd known each other forever. It was like this unspeakable trauma was supposed to be the launching point for a friendship that would've bonded them together indefinitely. But they hadn't been given enough time.

Josh pounded the ground. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

He felt Steph's arms wrap around his shoulders as she squatted beside him. She didn't say anything, but Josh knew there was nothing she could say. Steph knew better than anyone already that there were no words that could fix what they'd witnessed.

The phone call that Marco mentioned before going to sleep popped into his head. That was the moment he knew. While he disliked cocaine because of how his father acted while using it, that had never stopped him from selling it. He could've gotten some for Marco, but he didn't. At the time, he didn't know why he'd told him no, but now it was undeniable: he'd wanted to protect him.

But in the end, it was Marco who'd protected Josh. Through his shaky vision, he'd watched Marco take on Mildred to distract her from finishing him off. He'd watched Marco make the ultimate sacrifice.

"You know . . . I never meant to say that stuff to you back at the Boys & Girls Club," Steph said.

“What stuff?” Josh asked, eager for distraction.

“About you being a thief and poor. You just always seemed kinda rough.”

Josh nodded. “I guess I am.”

“It’s just . . . that intensity in your eyes—it reminded me of how my parents look at each other on their bad days. It scared me. Anyone else being like them scares me. But what scares me most is wondering if I have that in me too.”

He shook his head. “I get it . . . it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Steph said. “I was wrong. You’re nothing like them. You’re really sweet.” She gave him a nervous peck on the cheek. “And if this is my last day on Earth, even though I have to spend it here, I’m . . . I’m glad I get to spend it with someone like you.”

She squeezed his hand as a tear fell down her cheek.

“Thank you.” Josh’s bottom lip quaked. “I—I always thought you were the best—from the moment I saw you. You know why?”

Steph let out a quiet giggle through her tears. “Why?”

“Because you never tried to make anyone like you. You were just . . . you. And I think that’s the coolest fucking thing ever. But guess what?” Josh stood and helped Steph up. “This isn’t your last day on Earth. Not if I have anything to do with it. I’m gonna get us outta here. All of us.”

Steph nodded, and when Josh looked in her eyes, it almost seemed like she believed him. He turned to Matthew, who’d been politely standing off to the side and allowing them their moment. He looked frightened and skittish.

“One of the last things Marco wanted was for us to work together.” Josh wiped away his tears and extended his hand. “I want to honor his request.”

Matthew quickly extended his trembling hand and shook Josh’s. “Th-thank you . . . I want the same.”

Josh interlocked fingers with Steph and looked at the corner of the platform. It appeared there was another hallway that would lead them forward.

“Then let’s get the hell out of this place,” Josh said.

When they came around the side of the inflated wall, their positive vibes were spoiled by a horrifying visual.

There were eight long yellow lanes in front of them. Each started at the top of the platform and then dropped like an advanced rollercoaster. The

lanes glowed, covered in wet, yellow plastic like a gigantic Slip ’N Slide. Each lane also had a water source at the top—small hoses that emitted a constant flow of water.

You must solve the puzzle before you bounce. Then once over the wall you’ll select your route. Slide all the way down and be sure not to fall. Because you’ll still need to play some dodgeball . . . Josh replayed Marco’s reading of the Playground Rules in his head.

But the scariest thing about the lanes wasn’t how steep they were; it was the darkness that flanked each side. If the attempt wasn’t straight on, there was a good chance of falling off into the bottomless pit on either side of each lane. At the bottom of the paths were cardboard doors. Josh surmised that they’d have to go crashing right through them, but what lay beyond them he could only imagine.

He turned to Steph and Matthew. Their blank stares mirrored his own feelings. So much had happened, they were all so beaten down, that the shock factor wasn’t as potent.

Josh looked back at the massive Slip ’N Slides. “I guess there’s nothing left to do except . . . pick our lanes.”

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SLIP 'N DIE

They'd waited for some time, and Steph thought about taking the plunge long and hard. With no Mildred relentlessly stalking them to pose a threat, they'd finally had a moment to think about it. But despite suddenly having all the time in the world, a strange thing happened: they all realized they didn't actually *want* to stop and think.

Thinking hurt.

It brought up the memories of the people who'd been violently ripped from their lives. It made them wonder if they would share the same fate—or worse. It beat them down and stole momentum.

If I have to join Kayla, Danny, Marco, and Coach Cal . . . then so be it, Steph thought.

No one *had* to go. They could've all just sat there until they starved to death. They could've waited and prayed for help. But they all *wanted* to go. Realistically, they all knew that a plot so elaborate wasn't going to end with the police kicking in the door, guns drawn, coming to their rescue. Whatever they could do to find a way out of this awful place they were willing to do.

Steph looked over at Josh, and then at Matthew, who stood at the edge of the lane beside him, and nodded.

"I guess I'm ready," Steph said.

"Me too," Josh whispered.

"Matthew?" Steph called, studying the fear on his face. "Are you still gonna go along with us?"

He seemed more hesitant, but he finally agreed.

“Okay, like we agreed then,” she said. “We go on three.”

Steph looked at the narrow lane and the darkness on each side of it, trying to control her breathing.

You’ve had enough darkness for one day, haven’t you? Enough for a lifetime . . .

“One . . .” Matthew said.

“Two . . .” Josh said.

She didn’t focus on anything except the door at the end of the path.

“Three!” Steph yelled.

She felt going headfirst would give her the most control—they all did. As her chest met the slippery surface, she glided like a gold medal figure skater on ice. With her arms at her sides, Steph embraced the drop and let fate do what it would with her. The wind in her face pushed her skin back like a wicked amusement park ride.

As she barreled down, the darkness remained at her sides, and before she knew it she was crashing through the cardboard door. The material buckled as she exploded through and went tumbling over another ledge into a massive pit. When her body hit the floor, it wasn’t as hard as she would’ve expected. She bounced up slightly upon impact, confusion swirling in her head.

Is this all made of . . . rubber? she wondered.

The massive rubber pit was circular—like a giant, empty swimming pool that was far too deep to climb out of. On one end, Steph spotted the advancement door, and at the midpoint and opposite side, several buttons were fixed to the walls.

Matthew hit almost simultaneously, and after a second’s delay, Josh came crashing in as well. But it appeared that Josh had an extra surprise behind his door—a cluster of barbwire entangled his body.

“Are you okay?!” Steph yelled.

“Yeah,” Josh groaned. “It’s just stuck in me.” Blood gushed out of Josh’s shoulder as he tried to dislodge the nasty barb, grimacing in agony.

“Ugh, it’s buried deep,” Steph said.

“The door!” Matthew yelled.

“I’ll deal with it later,” Josh said. “We’ve gotta keep going.”

They both helped Josh up and all made their way closer to the door. The walls surrounding them seemed to be made out of the exact same rubber as

the floor. But when they reached the door, they were met with a dreaded click.

It was locked.

“What?!” Matthew yelled. “We made it! It should be—”

“That was just part one,” the old woman interrupted, voice bleeding through the speaker. “Turn around and you’ll see five buttons on the wall across from you. You can’t leave until each one has been pressed. And if I were you, I’d hurry! You don’t want to get caught up in the . . . crossfire.”

No sooner than when she finished did a massive, shiny ball come barreling down a black ramp above the pit. The weight of the carbon-steel sphere shook the ground when it landed.

“Watch out!” Steph yelled.

The giant pinball was headed right for them, gaining momentum as it dipped into the slight decline in the pit. Josh and Steph went right, and Matthew went left. As the ball crashed into the rubber wall, it let out a powerful hum and propelled in the other direction.

“We’ve gotta hit the buttons!” Steph yelled.

“Shit,” Josh said, groaning with each stride as the barbwire sliced deeper.

Having reached the midpoint of the big rubber bowl, Steph pressed the button on their side and looked across the way. As Matthew hit his, the lights on each one transitioned from red to green. But there were still three more at the far end of the pit—in the exact area the steel ball was headed. The hum coming from the sphere intensified, now sounding almost otherworldly—almost like there was something inside powering it.

Josh pressed on, leading the way. While he was still hampered by the tangle of barbwire stuck in him, he gritted his way forward. “Let’s make a break for it!”

“Okay!” Matthew yelled.

He turned back to Steph. “I’ll take the middle button, you take the left one!”

“Got it!” Steph said.

She ran, never having felt more focused. As the giant pinball bounced off the rubber wall ahead, Steph knew they should have enough time to hit them before it made it to the opposite wall and bounced back. But as they closed in and took their lanes, her stomach felt like it hit the floor.

Another gigantic sphere of equal size came down the ramp even faster than the first. As it made the jump, it rammed Josh head-on. The stiff barbwire tangle acted as a buffer, springing him backward toward the center of the room. But that only spared him momentarily.

Steph hit her button and unleashed a bloodcurdling scream, watching helplessly as the carbon-steel spheres closed in to meet at the center of the bowl—right where Josh was. As the colossal pinballs collided, the sound of Josh's bones exploding echoed out.

Too shocked to move, Steph stood in place while Matthew pressed his button and quickly ran for the one Josh hadn't been able to reach. As the final one flipped, the strange hum coming from the pinballs stopped.

The force inside them was dead, but the damage was already done.

Steph ran faster than she'd ever run, sliding beside the bloody steel spheres and Josh's crushed torso. Blood was splattered all over his destroyed bones and mashed chest. The pressure of impact had pinched off one of his limbs at the forearm. With his sternum caved in, he continued to spit up blood. In this strange rubber bowl, he now looked like a human mashed potato.

"No!" Steph yelled. "Don't you leave me! Don't you fucking leave me too!"

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As Josh tried to speak, blood and spittle flooded through his broken teeth. The impact had also caused one of his eyeballs to jump out of its socket. The bloody orb dangled down the side of his face. His catastrophic injuries made it hard for him to talk. “You . . . you r-really are . . . all th-that and a b-bag of . . .”

“Josh,” Steph whimpered. “No . . . please.”

His eye started to roll up in his head and the empty socket spasmed. “Ch-ch-check on my g-grandma . . .”

As the life left him, Steph broke down, cradling his broken body into her chest. The hysterical sobbing continued as she let out another hellish wail. As the shriek left her, she felt something inside snap. The screaming stopped.

“They’re all gone,” she mumbled to herself.

The image of her mother’s manic face flickered in her mind. Steph had been keeping darkness at bay for her entire life. For Kayla, for Coach Cal, and, most recently, for Josh. But as the wicked sensation spread through her, she suddenly realized that the fight was over.

She’d lost.

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TORTURED CONSCIENCE

They're all dead, Rock thought. *Every single one of them.*

As he looked at the boy's crushed body and the horror on the girl's face as she held his lifeless carcass, that same feeling of helplessness revisited him.

Their blood's on your hands.

Rock found himself suddenly questioning if karma was a real thing. Or worse . . . if there was a God, had He been watching him? Were his misdeeds being categorized and charted? Would that same God be there to confront him when his miserable time finally ran out?

He didn't know much about any of them, and now, because of him, neither would the rest of the world.

"I can't believe that boy got crushed between them!" Geraldine said, unleashing a nasty cackle. "What are the odds? How utterly marvelous!"

"Zhat it was," Fuchs said. "But trust me, zhe grand finale, while simple, may be my most gruesome contraption of the lot. And how perfect zhat just two remain . . ."

"My, that certainly does sound titillating." Geraldine exhaled and turned back toward Rock. She put her hand on his thigh and patted it. "I must say, boy . . . you've done quite a good job."

Rock's heart began to race. Garnering praise from Geraldine Borden was like finding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow—it didn't happen. Yet somehow the blue-moon moment had arrived.

This is a good thing. Might make things easier for me—and, more importantly, for them . . .

Rock stared at the video feed of the girl. She looked disheveled and disturbed. The thoughtfulness and compassion that she'd brought to the group had been snuffed out. He could see that the girl was now as broken as he was.

Geraldine picked up the radio and hit the blue button. "Matthew, listen to me. The final room is next. Be prepared for me to call on you. You're so close. But remember—if you hope to see your parents again, you'll play it smart. Now get moving."

As Geraldine hung up the radio, it was like an idea had hit her. She stroked her chin, smirked, and mumbled to herself. "Parents . . ."

"What did you say, my lady?" Fuchs asked.

"Nothing that's *currently* relevant. However, once all the games inside the prototype have concluded, I'll share my suggestions and feedback. I think I've come up with a way to ensure that next time, when children enter my *true* Playground, the stakes will be even higher."

Rock carefully studied her expression. The more Geraldine thought about this idea the more upset it made him. The sudden darkness in her eyes frightened Rock.

"A way that each and every one of these filthy peasants will get the misery they deserve," Geraldine continued, a scowl on her face. "The fertile will not be spared—they will be punished, and God Himself will understand the mistake He's made when I break His chosen ones."

Fuchs seemed only slightly surprised and mostly excited. As his eyebrows raised, a menacing grin did as well. "I can hardly wait to hear you out. All of your ideas are golden. I should only be so fortunate to be by your side again. *We* should only be so fortunate."

As the old man turned to Rock, he remained in deep thought.

That's it . . . next *time*, Rock thought.

"Isn't that right, boy?" Fuchs asked.

Rock nodded. While he agreed with Fuchs' sentiment, it wasn't for the same reason. When Geraldine and Fuchs both reminded him of their future plans, it stuck in Rock's mind this time around. It might've been the exact leverage he needed to make a difference. Their twisted future—and Rock's presence in it—was everything he needed.

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BEST OF FIVE

It took a while before Matthew was able to motivate Steph to keep going. She didn't want to leave Josh's side. She looked different than before. The constant death had put her in a tailspin, and her downward spiral continued to grow darker. Josh had been the lone ray of hope remaining. Despite all the awful and horrible things she'd witnessed, Matthew could see exactly how much still having him had meant to her. The death had clearly broken her. And her new shattered persona frightened Matthew.

Steph followed him down the hall silently, and when they made it to what the old woman had described as the final room, she stood there looking like a lifeless zombie. The room, in comparison, was much different than any of the others—it was absent of the childish colors and style. It felt cold and to the point. The door locked automatically behind them, making Matthew try the handle again, but it didn't budge. They would be forced to face whatever the evil woman had in mind.

"Should I read the rules?" Matthew asked.

Steph said nothing.

"Don't bother," the woman interrupted. "I will do the honors. You two just go to the table and pick a side. Then, kindly insert your hands into the holes under your respective curtains."

"Okay," Matthew said, looking at his malformed hand. It only made sense for him to put the one that was deformed inside.

He approached the table, which had a single device resting atop it under a shroud. The hole was ominous and dark, but he forced himself to put his hand inside nonetheless.

You've done everything she's asked, Matthew thought. *Just keep listening. That's all you can do.*

"Young lady," the woman continued, "if I were you, I'd assume the position. You have a fifty-fifty chance of walking out of this room alive. But if you don't put your hand in that hole, it's going to drop to zero. You see, the vent at the top of the room is equipped to expel the same gas that sent your pathetic sister to her end. You remember that, don't you, dear?"

Steph didn't react to the words. The sadness seemed absent in her expression; it was only darkness now. But she'd heard the command, and Matthew was almost surprised when she decided to play along. Approaching the side of the device opposite him, she inserted her hand into the hole.

"Wonderful," the old woman said. "Now, for the sake of tradition, and as a homage to my late mother, I shall read you the final Playground Rules."

Matthew suddenly heard a faint drilling noise followed by a stabbing sensation in his fingers. He let out a scream, but as he stared across at Steph, she remained silent. Matthew tried to move his hand but realized he couldn't.

The veil atop the table slowly lifted, revealing a horrific contraption. Inside a transparent box, Matthew was faced with the root cause of the pain in his fingers: several long metal screws had been crudely inserted into his hand. Some had hit, while others had missed, but the ones that landed burrowed deep enough to hold him—and Steph—in place. While his melted hand and fused fingers oozed blood, he quickly realized the screws were the least of his problems. Several items were arranged inside the see-through container. A large, unhinged pair of rusty scissors sat on the side of his fingers. Above his palm was a heavy rock fixed to a hydraulic press. And finally, on the other side, near his thumb, was an industrial-grade paper cutter.

Matthew shivered as he stared at the sword-like edge of the paper cutter aligned with the webbing between his thumb and index finger. Sweat oozed off the crown of his head. He wanted to cry and plead, but he knew it would do little to help his case. The psychotic woman hadn't let up yet—why would she now, just before the finish line? If he just kept his mouth shut and went through with it, maybe she would have mercy on him.

The speaker on Matthew's vest crackled again. "This final game is one that most every child has played at least once. In fact, many children use this game as a means for making decisions. And rest assured, today will be no different." She cleared her throat. "All right, Playground Rules: *Rock, paper, scissors, pick your sign. But choose wrong and pain will be thine. Continue to play to the best of five. Then the winner must choose who will survive.*"

"If I live, I'm going to make sure you don't," Steph said. "I'm going to get a knife and stick it deep inside you. I know I can . . . and I will."

When Matthew heard her threaten the woman, his eyes widened with terror.

"My, you've certainly come alive, haven't you, dear," the old woman said. "I like it. But let's not put the cart before the horse. Why don't we see if you have what it takes to win first. There's a counter that will activate momentarily. It will count aloud like this: one . . . two . . . three . . . shoot! Don't forget, best out of five wins. Oh, and one last thing. Matthew, be sure to angle the camera so we can see your hand *and* hers. We don't want any cheating now."

"Wait . . . you've been recording this for her?!" Steph yelled, gritting her teeth.

"I . . . I didn't have a choice!" Matthew cried. "I swear! She made me do it!"

"Oh, he's been doing more than recording," the woman said. "Like that little scream on the court that saw your beloved coach lose his head. I say 'Jump!' and dear little Matthew asks 'How high?' "

"You fucking screamed on purpose?!" The rage in her eyes was terrifying. It was like a demonic force had been let loose inside of her. Then, a creepy calmness suddenly took hold of her as Steph growled, "You told me that was an accident . . ."

"It . . . it was, kind of!" Matthew cried.

"You told my sister and Josh that it was an accident . . ."

"I'm glad the two of you are trying to work things out, but we've got a game to play," the woman said. "Please ready your free hands, and best of luck to the both of you!"

The computerized voice began as the counter lit up. It was so quick that Matthew could do little besides start shaking his free, undamaged hand, hoping God Himself would transmit the proper selection into his brain.

Steph prepared to shoot, mirroring Matthew, shaking her one hand that remained outside the transparent box.

“One . . . two . . . three . . . shoot!” the voice yelled.

When he looked down, he saw that his hand had chosen scissors while Steph’s had chosen rock.

“Nooooo—”

Matthew’s plea was cut short when a small block popped up from the table to elevate his hand and the hydraulic press slammed the massive rock down on it. The bones cracked like popcorn erupting in a microwave. It rubbed off some of the skin, bloodied several of his knuckles, and triggered more blood to pour from the screw wounds.

“One, zero,” the old woman said.

The pain nearly made him faint, but Matthew forced himself to stay strong and obedient. Keeping his whimpers low, he bit his lip. Matthew knew that following directions was his only chance. Right when the press lifted off his hand, the counter started up again.

“One . . . two . . . three . . . shoot!”

His hand made a rock this time and Steph’s made the scissors.

When the rock came crashing down on her hand, more sounds of bones breaking filled the room. She grunted, like a sick animal that was thirsty for blood.

“Let’s fucking go,” she growled.

“That’s the spirit!” the woman said. “One, one!”

Before Matthew could think, the voice was back again.

“One . . . two . . . three . . . shoot!”

Matthew showed the scissors while Steph chose paper.

The jaws of the rusty scissors snapped shut abruptly, snipping off Steph’s pinky, ring finger, and middle finger in the process. She couldn’t help but scream as she watched the blood shoot all over the transparent box. Her hand quivered as her face went white as a ghost.

“Oh my,” the old woman said, sounding taken aback by the grisly nature of the wound. “One, two . . .”

Again, the counter sounded off, relentlessly pushing them forward. “One . . . two . . . three . . . shoot!”

Somehow Steph powered through, or maybe she was just clenching her shooting hand in a fist trying to deal with the shock and pain of the injury.

But she soon realized that it wasn’t a good sign to choose when Matthew showed paper.

In the blink of an eye, the industrial-grade paper cutter slashed downward, cutting through her hand webbing and beyond. As the entire thumb was severed, the look on Steph’s face contorted. She still harbored the white, ghostly features, but rage returned to her eyes. It was like a genetic disposition for violence deep inside her had been activated.

“And we have a winner!” the old woman shrieked with joy. “By a score of one to three, you, little Matthew, will be set free.”

A mechanism triggered, causing the screws in Matthew’s fingers to rotate in the opposite direction. He yelped, pulling his bloody, broken hand out of the hole.

“So long as you kill the girl, that is . . .” the old woman said coldly. “Look under the table. There are several devices to assist you, should you require them.”

“What?!” Matthew cried. “You—you never said anything about killing—”

“My boy,” the old woman interrupted, “you mustn’t have listened closely to the Playground Rules: *Continue to play to the best of five. Then the winner must choose who will survive.* We did have an alternate game planned if only a single child had made it this far, but since both of you are here, we must abide by *these* rules. And I’m afraid there can only be one.”

As he looked under the table at a shiny pair of scissors, many things ran through Matthew’s head—seeing his family again, survival, and even Steph’s family. But he didn’t see himself plunging those scissors in Steph. He could live with a lot of things, but slaughtering an innocent girl in cold blood wasn’t one of them.

“I . . . I can’t,” Matthew said.

“Of course you can,” the old woman corrected.

“Then I won’t.”

“All right, so be it. Release the girl.”

The lone screw that was still holding Steph’s mutilated hand in place twisted in reverse. She fell to her knees.

“Young lady,” the old woman said, “if you have what it takes to kill the boy and tear victory away from him, then you’ll be the one who walks out of here.”

Before Matthew could even react to her offer, Steph popped up from behind the table. The glimmer of the scissors came toward him in a flash. Matthew sidestepped her, bumping into the table.

Steph's first wild slash missed, but the second came in before he could protect himself. The partially open scissors stabbed Matthew's shoulder meat, causing him to cry out. He fell to the ground and Steph mounted him, raising the shears once again.

"Wait, Steph!" Matthew pleaded. "You don't wanna do this! This is sick! Y-y-you don't have to be like her!"

"This isn't her," she growled, eyes looking like two yo-yo-sized fireballs.

The Fireball! Matthew thought.

"This is me!" Steph shrieked.

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As the tip came down, Matthew moved his head at the very last second and used the momentum to toss Steph off him. He reached into his pocket with his good hand and unwound his Yomega Fireball. As he knelt on her back and twisted the string around her neck, Steph flailed about like a wild animal hungry for a kill. The blood pouring from her destroyed hand sprayed all over, drenching Matthew's face.

"Shhhh," Matthew whispered, starting to sob. "Please, Steph, just calm down."

The sounds of her choking intensified as he twisted the string tighter with his hands.

"I—I don't wanna hurt you!" he wailed. "I didn't wanna hurt anyone! I just wanted to see my mom and dad again! Is that too much to ask?!"

Before he realized it, Steph's body had gone limp, and as he continued to strangle her he felt the full weight of her cranium against the string.

"No, no, no," Matthew whispered, dismounting her and turning Steph sideways.

Her eyes looked bugged-out. Many blood vessels had busted, and her drool-drenched tongue hung out the side of her mouth.

While the weight of the world felt like it lifted from Matthew's shoulders for a moment, he soon realized it was merely an exchange.

"What have I done?" he whispered, smashing his hands into the sides of his head. "What have I done?!"

The speaker crackled again. "A marvelous job," the old woman said. "An absolutely marvelous job."

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UNTIL NEXT TIME

“That was . . . incredible,” Geraldine said, sounding like she needed a cigarette after sex. “Dare I say *orgasmic*.”

“I’m glad zhat you enjoyed yourself, my lady,” Fuchs said with a grin. “I imagine zhis is zhe first of many adventures for us.”

The thought of having another run of such mayhem sickened Rock. As he listened to the hysterical boy mumble to himself and looked at the body of the mutilated girl, he heard a voice inside him.

Tell her.

“That boy . . .” Geraldine said. “Who’d have thought that it would be *him* there in the end? After everything he’s been through. It’s a shame, really.”

“What shall we do wizh him?” Fuchs asked.

“We let him go,” Rock said.

They both turned to him, their faces looking like they were mid–electroshock therapy.

“Wh . . . what did you say?” Geraldine asked.

“He hasn’t seen any of our faces,” Rock explained. “He doesn’t know who we are or where he is. He did everything you asked him to.”

“Have you gone mad?” Geraldine asked.

“That’s what you told him all along . . . you—you promised him.”

“That’s called motivation,” Geraldine said. “The boy is a worthless lump of burned flesh and trauma now. A killer. Tell me, what good will he be to the world?”

Rock imagined she looked at him very much the same way—after all, that was how he looked at himself.

“Probably nothing,” Rock said. “He’ll probably wake up screaming every night.” He glared at her. “He’ll probably hear the last gasp of the girl he strangled in every breath he takes. He’ll probably look in the mirror every morning wishing God didn’t let him walk out of this place. But that’s his right. He earned it.”

An awkward silence filled the room. He wondered if Geraldine could sense that some of his own emotions were starting to shine through in his words. He’d never seen her so taken aback. He realized that it was best to quickly capitalize on the seed of doubt he’d planted in her head.

“This was just the prototype,” Rock continued. “Your real masterpiece—your *true* Playground—is underway. I will ensure that every brick is laid properly. And I will be by your side to loyally serve you. While I realize that you have given me everything a man could ask for since taking me in, it is also true that I’ve never asked you for anything. Please . . .” He fought off the tears and steadied his voice. “I beg you, let me have this.”

Another long silence lingered as Rock’s heart pounded in his chest. It was the best argument he could make. It was the only argument he could make.

As he stared into Geraldine’s glowing eyes, he saw disgust and annoyance. But as she continued to digest his plea, the wrinkles on her forehead slowly smoothed out.

“It’s a strange thing,” Geraldine said. “But the very same thought crossed my mind earlier.”

Fuchs looked blown away. “My lady, you can’t be ser—”

“Today—and only today—Rock gets his way,” she said. “But this is your *one* favor.”

Rock grinned ever so slightly.

Raising her wrinkled finger, Geraldine brandished a small smile of her own. “And rest assured, you’re going to be working it off for the rest of your miserable life.”

“Gladly,” he whispered.

Geraldine turned to Fuchs and clapped her hands together. “Now, speaking of work and the prototype, we have a massive task ahead of us. This entire model will need to be deconstructed—the pits filled in, or at the very least camouflaged. We can’t have things looking too obvious.”

“What do you mean?” Fuchs asked.

“I mean we must build a *real* Playground in place of the prototype. It must look natural and perfect. When that boy was screaming about his mother and father, well . . . it gave me an even grander idea.” Her eyes lit up. “That, in part, is why it feels necessary to reward little Matthew. But such an idea will require an ambitious façade.”

Fuchs scratched the side of his face as if trying to figure out the right question to ask.

“And let’s talk about the cameras,” Geraldine continued. “Next time, I don’t want any of this first-person nonsense. It was fine for the prototype, but for my masterpiece . . . I want a camera in every room. No, better yet, I want *multiple* angles.”

She glared at the monitor, deep in thought. Rock wondered if she was thinking about the boy again.

“But more than anything, you know what I want?” she asked.

“What is it, my lady?” Fuchs asked.

Her wicked grin now stretched from ear to ear.

“Parents.”

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THE DROP-OFF

As Rock drove in the rain, he listened to the patter of the droplets smacking against the windshield. There was something about gloomy weather that always comforted him. Maybe it was the darkness, or maybe it was the thunder. Or maybe it was that rainy days were all he'd ever known.

You did it, Rock thought. *Somehow you did it. But at what cost?*

Sure, he'd saved Matthew's life—or what was left of it—but at the expense of how many others? How many people were walking around at that very moment, clueless to the dark truth: that one day they'd soon be headed to the bowels of Geraldine Borden's heinous estate?

Can't save 'em all. Can't even save myself . . .

Rock exhaled, wondering if the tiny glimmer of humanity he'd seen inside Geraldine was a fading spark or a growing ember. He hoped the answer was the latter. Maybe the lone act of kindness within the torrent of wickedness was the start of a different trajectory for all three of them.

I wouldn't bet on it.

Geraldine had already given him a plethora of ghastly chores that he would need to get started on upon his return. Grinding up the bodies of the dead children in the woodchipper and feeding them to the garden was at the top of the list.

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As Rock pulled into the parking lot of the playground, he was grateful for the rain. There was no one in sight—exactly the conditions he needed.

He parked the car in a discreet location and popped the trunk. Quickly working his way around, he lifted Matthew out. The boy remained tied up with the bag on his head. He didn't say a word as Rock carried him to the swings. But as soon as his butt touched the rubber seat, he cried out.

"No! Please, not again!"

"Hey, it's okay, kid," Rock said. "It's not like last time. I told you—you're free. I'm gonna cut you loose, but just don't take the bag off until you count to twenty. Okay?"

He could hear the boy starting to sob as he whispered, "O-okay."

As Rock loosened the ropes, he thought about the boy and all he'd been through. A somber feeling took hold of him as he leaned beside Matthew's ear.

"You did what you had to," Rock whispered, trying to stop his bottom lip from quivering. "Going back ain't gonna be easy, but you'll find a way. But just . . . just promise me one thing."

"What?" Matthew asked.

"Don't let this define you. I mean to say . . . don't let the bad things that happened to you . . . be all that your life's about."

The boy cried, slowly nodding as Rock gently stroked his shoulder, doing everything not to add to the sobs.

"Because, otherwise . . ." Rock whispered, "you'll end up like me."

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THE BAD GUY

Matthew sat in the middle of the couch, his mom on one side and his dad on the other. As they watched *The Mighty Ducks*, it was hard for him to focus. It's not that he wasn't enjoying the movie. He'd had a few laughing fits in between stuffing his face with homemade French fries. He just couldn't believe how everyone had come back together.

Dad's roach-infested basement apartment was a thing of the past—he'd moved back in with Mom. Matthew learned that when he'd gone missing, it had destroyed both of them. It tore them up so badly that neither of them could sleep. All they'd done for every waking moment was search for him. On foot and by car, plastering every telephone pole with images of his face.

Well, the face he used to have.

As weeks turned into months, they'd found themselves spending much of their time together, talking and strategizing about how they would find Matthew. Over time, they slowly remembered why they'd been married for so long in the first place. The special bond they shared before Matthew was born, and the indescribable connection that practically joined them at the hip thereafter.

Never thought we'd be here again, Matthew thought.

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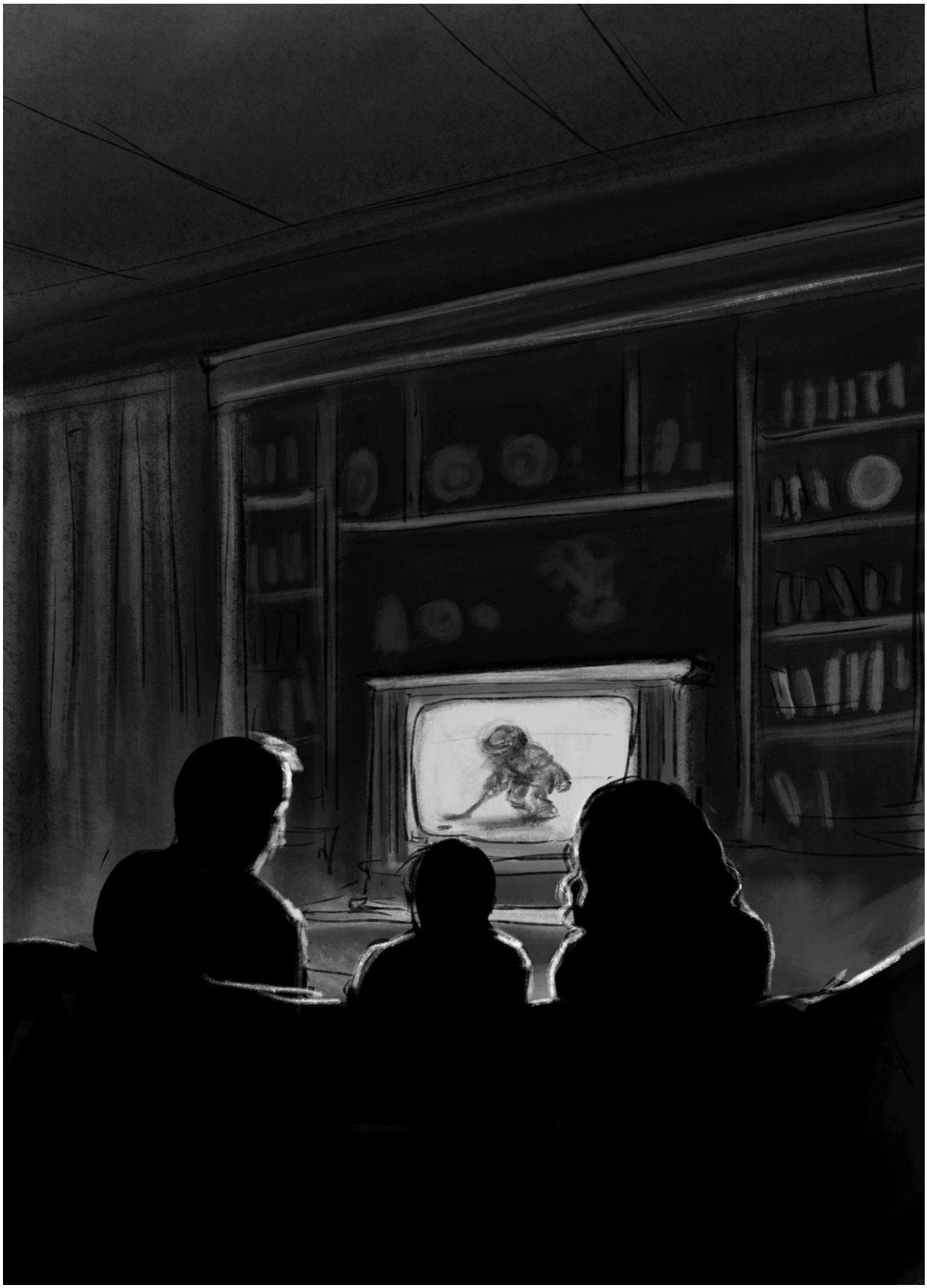

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Matthew looked down at his dad's hand and then his mom's. They were both wearing their wedding rings again.

As horrible as his disappearance had been, the silver lining was that it had drawn them back together. Bill had no other choice but to step aside and respect the power of family. He wasn't a bad guy, just not the *right* guy. Just not his dad.

The Bad Guy, Matthew thought.

Things were far from perfect. When Matthew sat down in the morning and ate his cereal, he had flashbacks to the Playground. The box he was trapped inside would come to life again. The blood, death, and mayhem would always be in his subconscious. He wondered why he was taken there. What had he—or the rest of the kids for that matter—done to deserve such an experience.

One morning, while Matthew was eating his cereal, he'd glanced at the back of the milk carton, only to find Steph and Kayla's faces staring back at him. This instantly triggered flashes of his yo-yo string around Steph's neck and her tongue flopping out of her mouth. Matthew wasn't sure it would ever be possible to live such a horrible thing down. He didn't dare tell his parents such a thing, nor the authorities. He stuffed it in a box, deep in the darkest recesses of his mind, hoping to never come across it again.

Sometimes it's better to be the bad guy . . .

Matthew certainly felt *he* was, after his sickening stay at the Playground. He was a lot of things: disfigured, disabled, a murderer, a liar—the list went on. But as tears fell from his eyes and he squeezed his parents tight, there was one thing that he no longer was: a child of divorce.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aron Beauregard had pogs but never a pogo stick. He has eaten Lunchables but is not particularly fond of them. Skip-It was something other kids had that he never got to try, but a Super Soaker 50? You bet your balls! He never had a retainer or braces—his bottom teeth still remain quite crooked. Basketball was a sport he enjoyed playing when he was young, even though his shot accuracy was—and is—pretty shitty. Yo-yos were always cool to him, but he couldn't do sweet tricks with them. Pump sneakers would've been dope, but he never scored them. He definitely smoked a bunch of weed in his day, but as a crusty, aging man with no fewer than two gray hairs atop his right shoulder, weed now tends to make him paranoid. Do you believe that makes him a total pussy or just lame?

Aron Beauregard can be found on the following platforms:

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To find out what happens to Rock Stanley, Geraldine Borden, and Adolpho Fuchs, read my prior novel *Playground*.

A special deluxe hardcover edition of the book can be obtained exclusively at **ABHorror.com** which includes a personal essay about when the book went viral and people were calling for my death and imprisonment. Good times!

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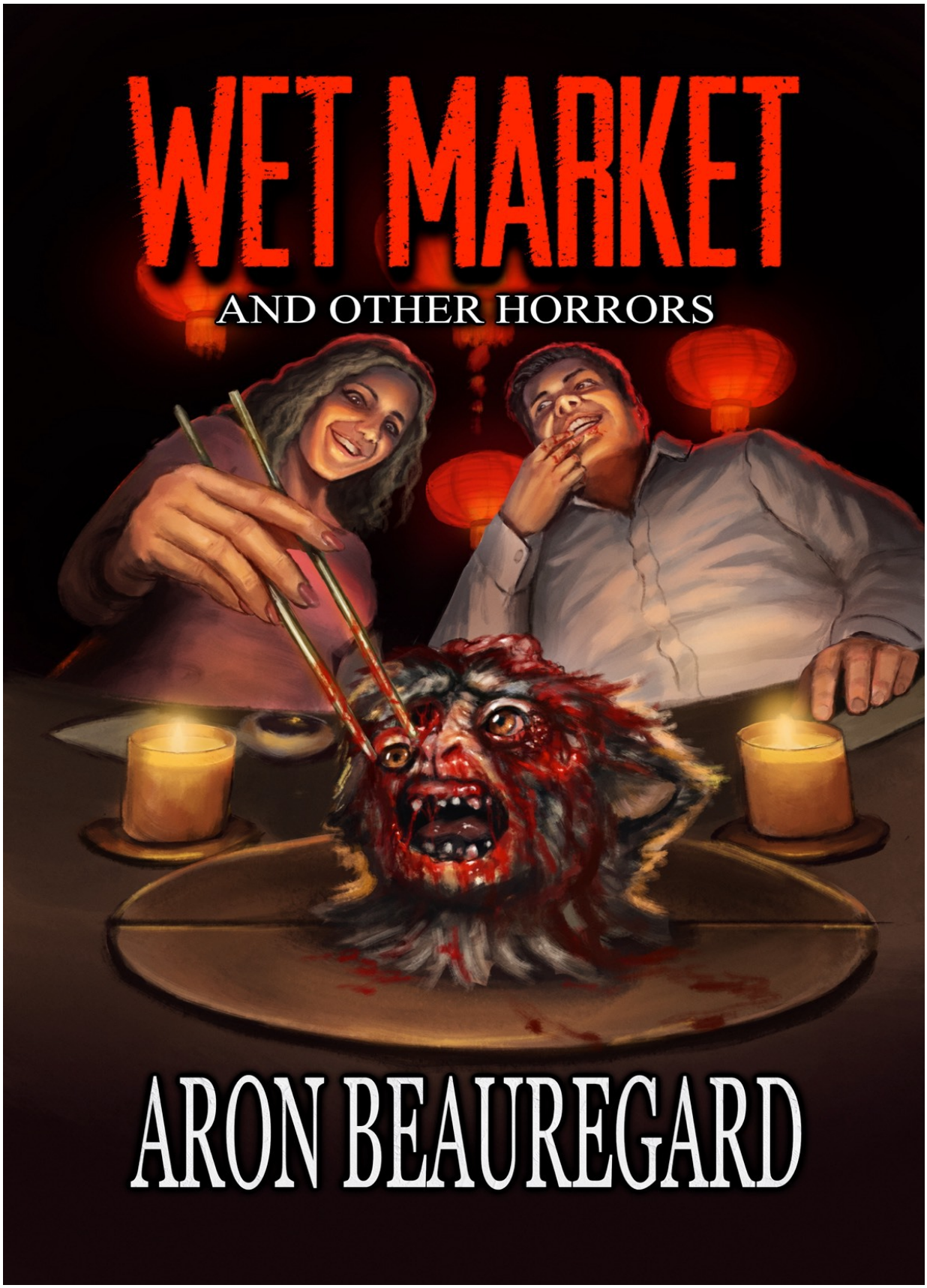
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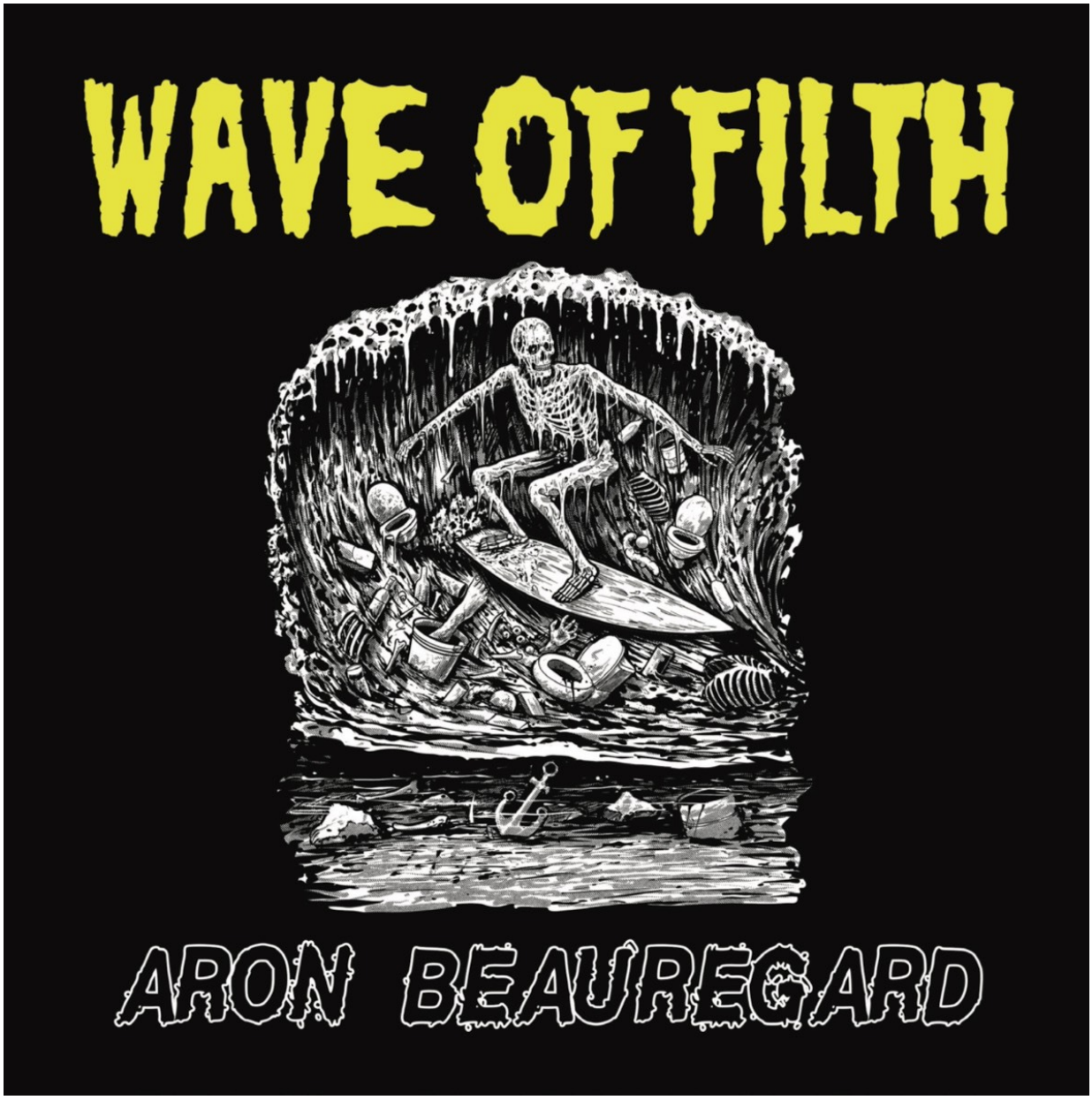

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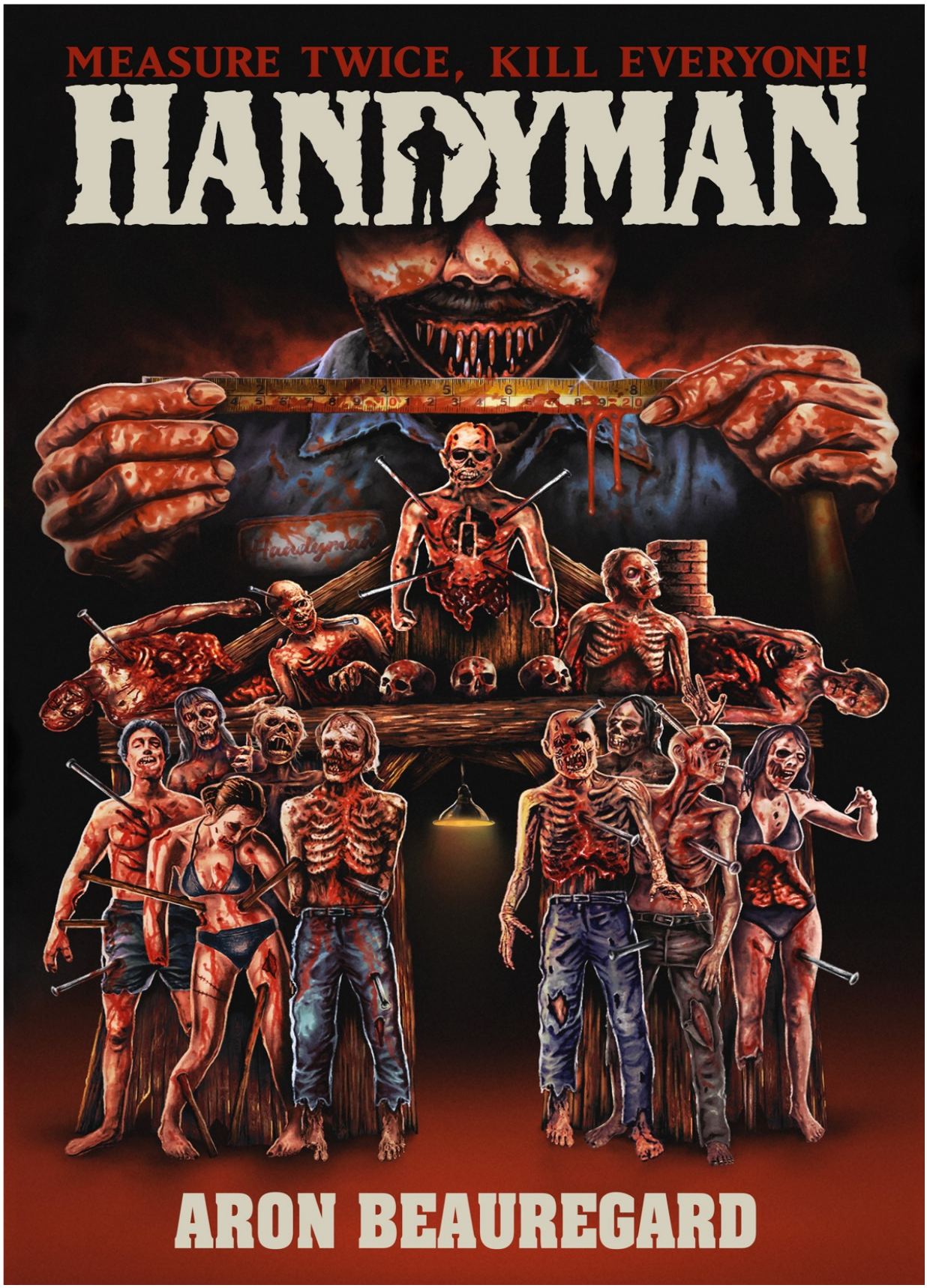
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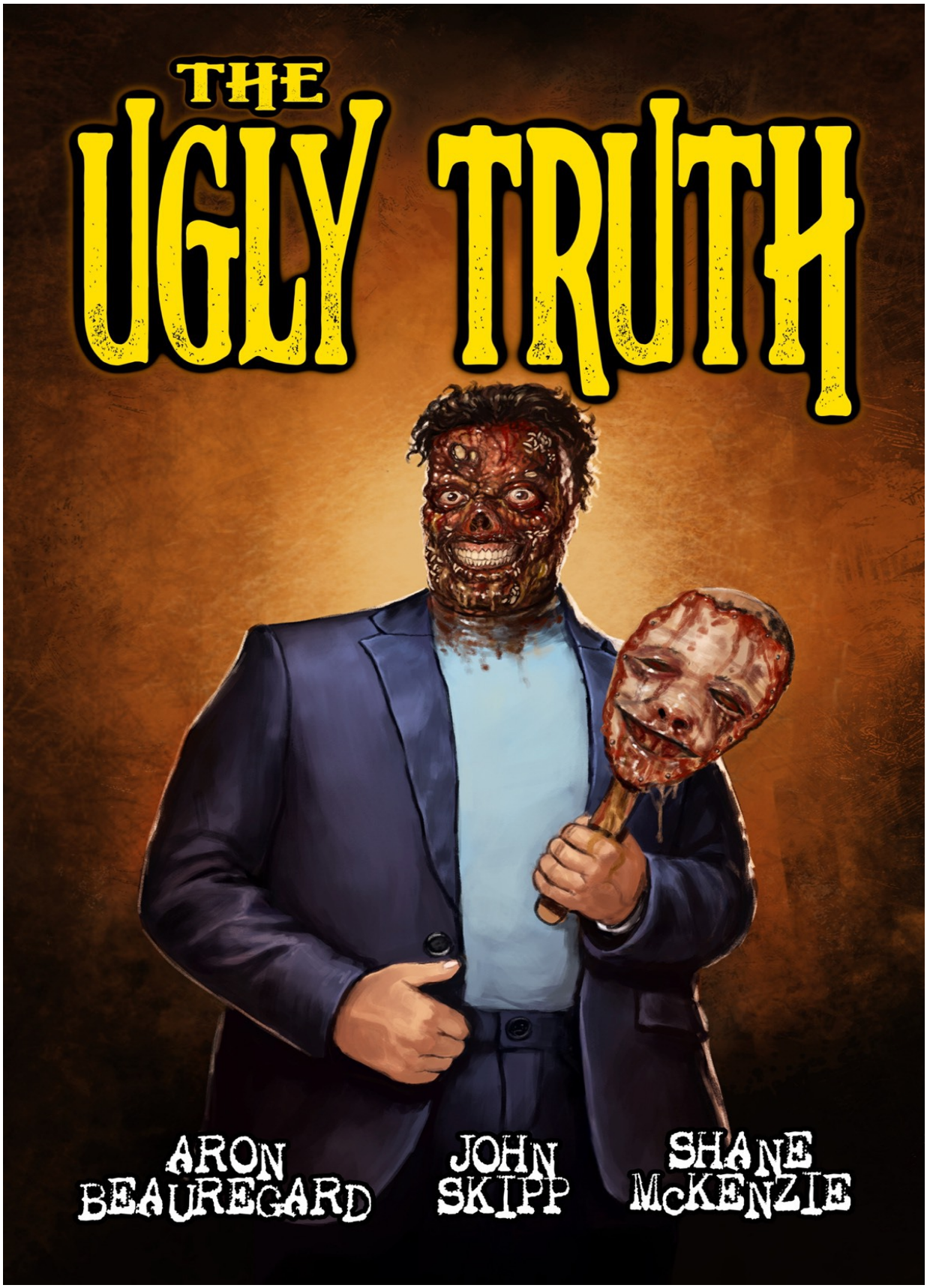
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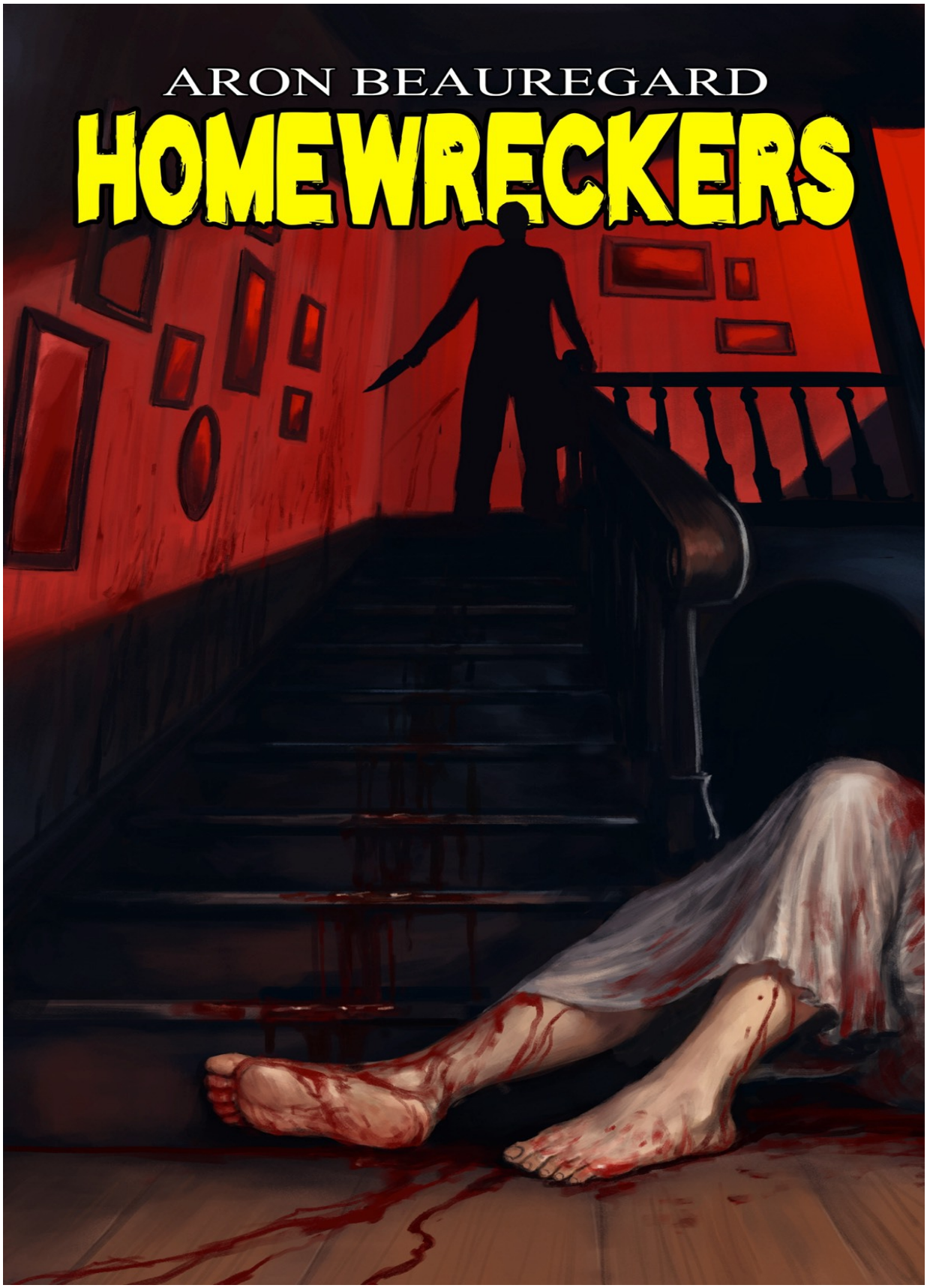
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